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Eden Holmes

At first glance, there is no discernible difference between the photographs of the two young men: similar dark hair with a deep side part, identically inquisitive gray eyes, matching stiff white collars, and indistinguishable solemn expressions.¹ No dissimilarities in their childhoods—the pair were born in rural West Virginia to large, humble farming families, attended the same two-room primary school and graduated from unpretentious Fairmont Normal School at the top of their respective classes.² Both men married women from their hometown, pursued higher education at personal expense, and fought to promote the working class in their professional lives.
Two notable people who sparked a researcher’s nightmare. Two promising lads with the same name, born in the same year, in the same town. Only one difference existed in their youth, a difference that contributed to drastically divergent adulthoods: one attended Purdue.

Howard Ernest Satterfield and Howard Ernest Satterfield, twins in moniker and background, have caused me as their researcher to lose shattering amounts of sleep. I had been asked to create a biography of a Purdue student from the graduating class of 1904, and my research tracking Howard Satterfield, from Marion County, West Virginia, divulged no shortage of details, including an apparent four-year time gap where I assumed the young man was at Purdue. After weeks of in-depth research and drafting, I finally discovered the stressful truth—there were two men with matching monikers and a similar upbringing, and I had been tracing the path of the wrong one. I had confused the trails of their lives, mixed up by their identical names and similar backgrounds. However, after I began to examine their lives side by side, separating previously twisted strings of history and identifying the point of divergence—a Purdue education—I found the significance of the Boilermaker experience at the turn of the century. The youthful doppelgangers ultimately led
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starkly different lives after their identical childhood path diverged, and comparing their ultimate careers and lifestyles demonstrates the influence of a landgrant university education. Howard Ernest Satterfield, the Boilermaker (hereafter referred to as “the Professor”), and Howard Ernest Satterfield (henceforth denoted by “the Politician”) embody an ideal contrast, as their remarkable (and confusing) similarities allow for perfect consideration of the results of a Purdue education on the life of a working-class young man.

The majority of university students at the turn of the twentieth century hailed from affluent families, whose financial stability enabled the students to focus solely upon schoolwork and social engagement during their time on campus. However, as land-grant institutions such as Purdue increasingly offered degrees in “practical” fields like engineering and agriculture, young people from varied backgrounds were beginning to seek higher education. Such students, whose families struggled to fund their education, often worked their way through school, and their interactions with fellow, more affluent pupils were strained by class differences and economic contrasts. The Professor, member of the Purdue class of 1904, financed his educational pursuits with an entrepreneurial tailoring business in West Lafayette, and my investigations into his life and
the conditions of the institution during his schooling indicate that his pecuniary venture and modest upbringing placed the Professor on an alternate social plane from his classmates.\textsuperscript{5}

As a land-grant college emerging from the Morrill Act of 1862, Purdue was founded on the principles of upward social mobility and educational equality, with the purpose of promoting “the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life . . . without excluding classical studies.”\textsuperscript{6} In order to support the development of the nation’s industrial sector and facilitate agricultural progress, America built universities to educate engineers, agricultural experts, military specialists, and mechanical scientists, which differed from traditional collegiate curriculums that focused primarily on liberal arts and humanities. These universities, which included Cornell University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Clemson University, and numerous state institutions, offered achievable and practical educations in attempts to engage young people from diverse origins in academic achievement.\textsuperscript{7}

Although these colleges existed to edify individuals in practical fields, the bulk of university students still hailed from privileged backgrounds, whose moneyed families were able to finance their scholarly pursuits,
especially with the promise of financial return on their schooling. Even individuals from traditional backgrounds, such as farming and modest service fields, usually had the financial means to enable the students to focus purely upon their education and social lives while at school. Education researchers Roger Geiger and Nathan Sorber argue that students from less advantaged backgrounds, such as the Professor, stuck out from their economically comfortable peers, as some pupils were forced to finance their own educations and restrained from pursuing the same social pursuits. Many had to drop their studies around harvest time, as they were needed at home, or stop school for a few semesters to earn their tuition for the next few. In addition, the social engagements of young students, which include gambling, drinking, and fashion, stretched beyond the economic capabilities of working-class students, limiting their social equivalency to their peers. However, dedication to their studies and extracurricular engagement could allow a proletarian student a degree of social engagement, and their hard-won education expedited future success and achievement beyond their modest upbringings.

Born to humble farmers in West Virginia and obliged to support his family after the premature death of his father, the Professor’s options for advanced
education appeared grim. During high school, he engaged in a brief apprenticeship to a tailor, indicating a youthful desire to pursue a modest lifestyle, although intelligence and effort afforded him dreams beyond clothes-making. His achievements in secondary school, where he graduated with a 98 percent grade average, earned him the opportunity to study beyond Fairmount State Normal School, but he was forced to bankroll his tuition during his tenure at Purdue. Many financially strapped students might have supplemented their meager income through dishwashing or other menial physical activity, but the Professor, in a rush of innovation and enterprise, launched his own tailoring business. He employed the skills gleaned from a rural childhood and an apprenticeship in tailoring to finance his pursuit of higher achievement.

The Professor advertised in numerous school and community newspapers, including the Purdue *Exponent*, promoting custom-made menswear and repair services for his classmates and teachers. He was required to work alongside his studies, which may have demeaned him in the eyes of his peers. The Professor’s customers were his fellow students, which may have made them—or him—feel he was in a subservient position. His frequent advertisements in the Purdue University newspaper, which engaged customers, also led
to a possible social classification of “working class.” Although his engagement brought him moderate success, his public image as a menial who was reliant on his contemporaries to remain in school likely impeded communication and community parity. The Professor was subjected to teasing and exposure from his fellow students, with jokes about his frequent advertisements appearing in his senior yearbook—“Satterfield Tries to Draw in Co-Ed Trade—Inquire Within.”¹² In addition, his straight-arrow personality and aversion to financial waste were mocked, as a sarcastic poem rhymed, “What would you think if you should see . . . Satterfield playing poker?”¹³ The Professor placed his academics (and paying for them) as his highest priority, and the hard work and dedication associated with such pursuits may have submitted him to rank suppression from his affluent peers, even as the institution’s ideologies and administration worked to support diligent students from varied backgrounds.

Regardless of any social subjugation resulting from the Professor’s background and value system, the young student still fought for equal recognition among his peers. Although he was teased and belittled, required to work long hours outside of the classroom, and limited by family circumstances, the Professor joined a fraternity, participated in the Masonic Society, and
held the presidency of one of the most significant collegiate organizations at Purdue, the Young Men’s Christian Association. The Professor earned his bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering in less than four years, graduating with honors despite the pressures of maintaining his small business. The country boy from Nowheresville, West Virginia, battled the pressures of social stratification and the limitations of financial instability at Purdue University, and he went on to enjoy a lucrative career as an engineer and an academic.

This education, received both from Purdue Engineering and the School of Hard Knocks, led the Professor through numerous manufacturing administration positions throughout the Midwest. Family tradition indicates that his burgeoning love of teaching, stemming from tenures as a night school educator held simultaneously with his jobs in manufacturing, resulted in a station as the head of the engineering departments at Winona Technical Institute in Indianapolis. After a few years of marriage to his high school sweetheart, the first female graduate of the University of West Virginia, the Professor relocated his small family to North Carolina. He began his career in academia as an instructor of mechanical engineering at North Carolina State Agriculture and Mechanical College (now North Carolina State University), another land-grant institution.
Professor served as head of the department for decades, working as an advisor and mentor for a variety of young students. Later, he began working as a contract engineer for numerous local business projects alongside his teaching position, applying his engineering knowledge to the practical pursuit of real estate construction. Over 175 buildings in Raleigh held his neat sign, “Satterfield Built,” and both positions—that of industrialist and instructor—contributed to his local prominence. He maintained membership to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and served as regional chief of the Engineering and Architectural Division of the Resettlement Administration. Even in his esteemed rank as department chair, the Professor never failed to recognize the struggles of his working-class students, whose backgrounds mirrored his own. He hired several of his students who needed financial assistance to continue their educations to assist in his contracting jobs. Notable Raleigh businessman William Daniel Martin worked for his advisor, the Professor, during his entire term at the institution and later referred to him as an inspiration.

The Professor reported that he owed his renown as an academic, engineer, and contractor to his education at Purdue University, where the collision of society with education helped to build his strength of conviction.
alongside the endowment of academic knowledge. He maintained ties to Purdue, returning to his alma mater numerous times to earn his master’s degree in mechanical engineering and to receive the latest updates in his field. The University contributed to the Professor’s early promotion and ultimate success, as the lessons bestowed during his stint at the institution greatly influenced the remainder of his professional and personal life.

But what would have happened if the Professor hadn’t attended Purdue?

The Professor’s archival twin, the identically named Howard Ernest Satterfield, the Politician, demonstrates a contrasting fate. When the Professor departed for college in Indiana, the Politician remained in their small West Virginia town, and the course of his life indicates the possible resulting course of a non-Boilermaker.

The second Satterfield, the Politician, began life as a middle child of eleven, working on the family farm at the expense of a secondary education. Rather than pursue an advanced degree, the Politician lingered in the Fairmont area after high school graduation, working assorted jobs as a miner, meat-cutter, and grocery clerk, none of which engaged the intellectual prowess demonstrated by his notable academic scores in
primary school. After starting a family with his own high school sweetheart, the Politician completed a mail course in law from the American Correspondence School in Chicago presumably in the hopes of furthering his status, but he remained in rural Marion County, pursuing various careers as a meat-packing manager, insurance salesman, and auctioneer. His modest achievement provided financial comfort for his wife and six children, but as the Professor’s career suggests, the Politician was continually outpaced by his more academically accomplished competitors in career success and community acknowledgment.

In each of his diverse vocations, the Politician may have noted the same drastic social stratification that had plagued his doppelganger, observing the stark contrasts of treatment, pay, and prospects of individuals based upon their background and educational experiences. However, rather than working within the education system to build academic foundations, the Politician sought to implement change through the civil sphere. After earning a seat in the West Virginia State House of Representatives in the early 1920s, the Politician served on the Committee of Arts, Sciences, and General Improvements, where many of his extant speeches describe the importance of propagating applicable scientific and engineering knowledge.
documentation in the early 1930s indicates the Politician’s personal ties to the working class, as he called upon the legislature to regulate the conditions and pay for West Virginian coal miners. In spite of the rank suppression reinforced by his job-hopping years, eventually Satterfield achieved a degree of status as a politician in one of the poorer counties of West Virginia, working to support and promote blue-collar employees until his death. While the social restrictions of his background impeded his personal success, the Politician later utilized the lessons acquired in his work experience to champion others standing in his shoes.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the chaos of development caused numerous class conflicts and facilitated incredible social stratification, as blue-collar individuals sought to participate in the upward social mobility promised by increased educational opportunities. The pair of Satterfields, almost mirror images in childhood, familial background, and intellectual potential, were divided by a college education, an academic pursuit followed by one and missed by the other. Although their initial capabilities shone identically, the sacrifices made by the Professor in the pursuit of a Purdue diploma later contributed to distinguished achievement in scholarly and engineering fields, while the Politician struggled for years to achieve recognition of his intellectual skills in
the political realm due to his unstable background and lack of an academic degree. In the changing world of the early 1900s, a Purdue University education represented ability, knowledge, and experience. A working-class student’s diligence in the classroom and at his side job paved the way for an active transition from farm boy to college department chair. Although the difficulties of social subjugation and rank pressures constricted the growth of the twain Howard Ernest Satterfields, the Purdue experience facilitated an academic livelihood for the Professor, who continued to support the education of other working-class students for decades.

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Notes

1. The photographs I describe come from: Frances Gilchrist Gibson Satterfield, From Whence We Came (Raleigh: Itek Method Addressing Duplicating Service, 1973), 180, and West Virginia Legislature, West Virginia Blue Book (Charleston: West Virginia Senate Clerk’s Office, 1922), 152.

2. Debris, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries, 108.

3. Association of Land-Grant and Public Universities, The Land-Grant Tradition (Washington, DC: Association of Land-Grant and Public Universities, 2012), 9. These “practical” degrees pre-dated the land-grant university system, existing for centuries, but the incorporation of agriculture and engineering into standard curricula at land-grant universities facilitated the ability of the average individual to obtain a degree.

4. Catherine Reef, Education and Learning in America (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 96–97. Reef identifies the difficulties of the university experience for working-class students, who, in the attempt to achieve an education to better their futures, were faced with financial and class barriers to social acceptance among their wealthier classmates.

5. Advertisement written by Howard E. Satterfield, “Suits and Overcoats,” Exponent (West Lafayette, IN), Nov. 11, 1903.


9. Ibid., 167.


12. *Debris*, 1904, 293. Although such teasing and jibing was common among students at Purdue during the time period, the majority of references to Satterfield in school publications focused upon other students’ critiques of his humbler background and resulting financial thriftiness and dedication of character.

13. Ibid., 300.


15. Howard Ernest Satterfield was technically from Marion County, West Virginia, not “Nowheresville,” although the rural area likely felt like the middle of nowhere on occasion.


20. Gibson Satterfield, From Whence We Came, 358.


24. West Virginia Legislature, West Virginia Blue Book (Charleston: West Virginia Senate Clerk’s Office, 1922), 152.

25. West Virginia Division of Culture and History, West Virginia Legislators: Marion County (West Virginia Archives and History, 2013).