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JUST HARRY



Lily Anderson



HARRY LEON HODGES was an ordinary man in an extraordinary situation. The average eighteen-year-old male in the early 1900s had very few options open to him. Generally, he was expected to take over the family business or find a job as a nameless face in the workforce. Many men like Harry would find themselves working in factories and shops, or performing manual labor. These men would do their best to scrape together a living, with little time for frivolities or new experiences.¹ Harry broke this mold.

When Harry first attended Purdue University in 1898,² only 2 percent of eighteen to twenty-four-year-

olds in the United States were enrolled at a higher education institution.³ With such a small percentage attending college, one would expect stories of geniuses, of beating the odds, and of exceptionalism. That is not Harry's story.

Harry did not come from the slums and work his way up; he came from an average family and lived in West Lafayette, Indiana. Harry did not attend Purdue and become the big man on campus; he attended and quietly obtained a standard education. Harry did not leave Purdue and revolutionize the field of civil engineering; he went on to work and support a family. He was a man to which many can relate. He was just Harry, and sometimes, that is the story most worth telling.⁴

Our heroes define us. They cause the small child to put on a cape and the mature adult to hang his up. Harry's own hero was not perfect, but he was a man who made his own way in life, worked hard, and survived trials. Harry's life often mirrored the life of his hero, sometimes by following in his footsteps, other times by sidestepping his mistakes. His hero was an average man, but as is often the case with heroes, Harry saw someone much more than average. Harry saw a man worth looking up to. Harry saw his father, Everett Macy Hodges.

Everett's life began like that of most average men: he was born. This man in particular, however, was born in rural New York to a successful farmer with many sons.⁵ As was often the case in that time, the farm did not pass to the middle child, Everett, but rather to an older sibling.⁶ This is perhaps why, in 1880, Everett came to work in Indiana as a dry goods clerk.⁷

It was a less than glamorous position. An 1864 *New York Times* article sums up the general situation for dry goods clerks: "There are hundreds of young men in this city eking out miserable lives as clerks, without the shadow of a chance of their ever being better off."⁸ Everett toiled away as one of those clerks for over twenty years, in the same place he first started. Through no real fault of his own, his career was stagnant, with no ladder to climb or even fall off of. However, that does not necessarily mean Everett was unhappy; his work was steady and allowed him to raise and support a family. His life may not have been exciting, but his hardworking nature allowed his children to grow up in a stable environment in a period when such things were often uncertain.

Sadly though, Everett's life was not without trials. When Everett was still just a farmer's son living in the state of New York, he had wooed a young girl away from the big city of Manhattan, and together, Everett and

Jennie Hodges left New York for the Midwest. Far away from friends, family, and familiarity,⁹ they made West Lafayette, Indiana, their home.¹⁰ Their first child was born shortly after they were married, a little boy named Everett Vinnedge.¹¹ It was a harsh time to be young and vulnerable,¹² however, and after only one year, Everett and Jennie buried their firstborn son.¹³ They persevered though, and went on to have four more children,¹⁴ including Harry.¹⁵ For thirty-seven years they were partners through every trouble and triumph. When Jennie died in 1912, Everett lost something crucial.¹⁶ Shortly after Jennie's passing,¹⁷ Everett left Indiana to live with his oldest child in Tennessee and did not return until 1920, when he was buried and reunited at last with her and their infant son.¹⁸

Everett never wore a cape, but that did not matter; he was not the world's hero, just Harry's. However, Harry was not his father. Everett gave Harry the chance to be something greater. The farmer's son became a clerk, and the clerk's son became an engineer. Perhaps more importantly though, when many were growing up too soon, Everett gave Harry the chance to be a kid and fully enjoy what the world had to offer before plunging into the trials and tribulations of adult life. Harry received a cape of gold and black and the honor of becoming a Purdue man, including all of the experiences and traditions that came with such a title.¹⁹

Dorm Devils cackled, mechanical textbooks crackled, and tank scrappers tackled.²⁰ Purdue was in no way a boring place in the early 1900s, and Harry found himself in the middle of a living, breathing campus full of culture and opportunities. It would be nigh impossible to attend and not have at least a little Purdue spirit rub off. Harry watched as the Dorm Devils, dressed up in white with pitchforks, hazed and terrorized startled freshmen. He stood solemnly with the other seniors as they rid themselves of their loathed mechanical textbooks in a ritualistic burning ceremony. If he wanted to count himself as a true Purdue man, he definitely defended his class's honor at the ol' Tank Scrap, knocking out a few teeth.²¹ Harry enjoyed sports, playing on the class football team as quarterback and serving as captain,²² as well as competing successfully in wrestling tournaments.²³ I am sure he attended at least one convocation, perhaps even sitting in the front row as James Whitcomb Riley entertained the Purdue student body.²⁴ If one became bored with the numerous extracurricular activities offered on campus, there also was rigorous class work. Make no mistake, even though the members of the class of 1904 were born over one hundred years ago, they were not that different from Purdue students today, as evidenced by this student's poem published in a 1903 *Exponent*:

There be phrases that please for their very words.
 And some that do good on occasion
 There be some that are used by the girl back home,
 And some of parental dictation
 But of all that I know, from please keep enclosed to
 "Fall in with no guns and sidearms" there is one that
 surpasses all other in weight,
 To one which the coldest of hearts warms
 When the calculus prof. with cold glances entrenched
 Says surly, losing his prey,
 "Owing to the class' misunderstanding, there will be
 no test today."²⁵

Also like students today, no matter how much they grumbled, they were expected to hold their own academically. For his degree in civil engineering, Harry was taught to master the skills of forging, mechanical drawing, physics, topography, calculus, chemistry, hydraulics, wood working, molding, surveying, and studies of materials and structure. He also needed to learn the basics of history, writing, German, and rudimentary mathematics.²⁶ Getting into Purdue was not necessarily difficult, but staying there could be a struggle.

Purdue tuition in the early 1900s was either free or very cheap for most students,²⁷ and being a land-grant college, Purdue's goal was to educate as many as pos-

sible rather than create a reputation of exclusivity.²⁸ For Harry, a young man living within walking distance of campus with no career lined up, Purdue may have seemed an easy choice, and becoming a Boilermaker meant Harry would experience a level of education and culture that few others could even imagine.²⁹ However, Harry did not know this at the time. When offered a job that would put money in his pocket immediately compared to two more years of calculus in pursuit of an uncertain career, walking away from Purdue made sense. Harry had no idea of the trials to come and how much those memories would mean to him; thus, like many other students, Harry dropped out.³⁰

Students left Purdue for a variety of reasons—most for the same reason as those who never enrolled in the first place. At the turn of the century, a college education was not particularly valuable. Things were starting to change, but most employers were still more interested in hands-on experience rather than theoretical knowledge.³¹ This way of thinking explains how Harry was able to easily get a job working for the local railroad. For two years he worked at the Big Four Railroad Company. Harry likely could have remained there for as long as he wanted, and no one would have batted an eye if he never returned to Purdue. However, Harry chose a different path, and in 1902, he reenrolled at Purdue to complete his education.

Sometimes having someone you look up to also means avoiding their pitfalls. Whether Harry was taking his father's advice or acting on his own observation does not matter; the result was the same. Harry did not take the first job that came along, but rather, he started on a road his father never could have hoped to walk down. Harry "The Kid" Hodges³² was privileged to have had a chance to develop and enjoy himself away from the working world, but when it came time to plunge back in, he was ready. He hung up his cape, picked up a hammer, and started his adult life as a Purdue Boilermaker.

Harry's working life began like that of most average men: he got a job. This job in particular, though, was for the railroad. In 1906, Harry was hard at work on the Oregon Short Line in Mill City, Nevada. His adult life started off much like his father's life did: a young man far from home, trying to find his place. Also like his father, he was not alone in his journey.³³ He too brought a girl from home with him, and on June 19, 1907, Harry married Elizabeth Miles of Indiana.³⁴

Harry and Elizabeth followed the train tracks, and when it came time to start a family in 1909, Harry was working for a railroad company in Utah. Harry and his wife had a much happier start to their family than his father, and little William Everett was alive and well

when his sister, Helen Elizabeth, joined them in 1911. Together, the small family moved from place to place, following the railroads.³⁵ The work was not always easy, but it was a booming industry and good place to be an engineer in the early 1900s.³⁶ Unfortunately, darker days were ahead.

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, and over fifteen million Americans were suddenly without jobs. Harry, while trying to raise and support a family, found himself in the midst of the Great Depression. With suicide and unemployment rates rising significantly, no one would have been surprised if Harry had given up.³⁷ However, Harry Hodges was not that kind of man. At times he found himself working entry-level positions, but Harry pressed on. Despite the bleak situation, he worked his way up from a draftsman in Utah³⁸ to an engineer for the Indiana Department of Transportation in Indianapolis.³⁹ In a period when many were barely scraping by, Harry fought to take the situation he was given and make it better.

When Harry died in 1955, he left behind the story of a dependable, adaptable, and practical man. An unassuming headstone marks his final resting place at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, fifty-two miles from where he started.⁴⁰ He lived in extraordinary times and situations, but he himself was never an

out-of-the-ordinary man. Sometimes, though, it is the people who lived history whom we need to hear from more than those who made it.

I would like to think Harry kept his 1900 class motto in mind as he made his way in the world: “Within Thine Own Sphere, Accomplish What Thou Canst.”⁴¹ His life was not a story of tragedy, achievement, or heroism; it was just a story of day-to-day struggles. He looked up to his father and tried to make him proud, but he also tried to surpass his father’s accomplishments. His choice to attend Purdue did not drastically change his life, but it set him apart and gave him experiences few others could claim. He fought to stay afloat in a time when many sunk, and he left behind a well-cared-for family. Most of all, he worked to lead the best life he could with the options available to him. He will not be found in any famous stories, but he will be found here. Most of us do not live a life for the history books, and neither did he. He was just Harry, and that is just fine.

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16. "Everett Macy Hodges," *Find a Grave*.

17. *Ibid.*

18. The Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States* (Washington, DC: Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1920), 3A.

19. *Debris*, 1904, 86.

20. Refer to the introduction of this book for more information. The Dorm Devils were a hazing group on campus. The Mechanics Burning was a popular event at Purdue, where seniors would destroy their mechanical textbooks at the end of the year. Tank Scrap referred to an annual event in which the incoming freshman class would physically fight the sophomore class for painting rights on the water tower. See Madison

Heslop's "Murky Drops" for a discussion of the Dorm Devils and gender at Purdue.

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