

THIS OTHER EDEN

By John I. Ades

A LITTLE OVER HALFWAY THROUGH THE FIRST YEAR OF THE ADVENTURES OF Southern Illinois University on the Edwardsville campus, the editors of the Daily Egyptian, the university newspaper at Carbondale, issued a call to us on this campus to let them know just what their country cousins up here were doing, especially in the arts. We were happy to do so and supplied them with no less than seven pages chock full of notices of such Madison and St. Clair County goodies as productions of Aeschylus's Agamemnon and Jean Paul Sartre's No Exit, the founding of Papers on Language and Literature--by now a major literary journal--performances of three Bach cantatas as well as of Mozart's Requiem, and an art exhibit of human figures fashioned out of discarded plastic Clorox bottles that was so smart it was later exhibited in Paris (that's France, not Kentucky). I was one of the Edwardsville contributors to this report, and since the date of this particular issue of the Daily Egyptian was April 23, 1966, Shakespeare's 402nd birthday, I decided to borrow a memorable phrase from his Richard II for my title: "This Other Eden," which the Carbondale editors promptly appropriated for the title of the entire issue. That phrase may sound a bit visionary, these days, coming as it does from the grandest patriotic speech in all literature, but that's the way many of us felt about the start-up of this campus.

Those of us who had pioneered here, beginning in the late 1950s in the comfortably open and extraordinarily cordial arms of Alton and East St. Louis, had been beguiled from the start by assurances that a new campus would soon be built in the cornfields and greensward a couple of miles southwest of Edwardsville. But that the University

also had its eye on more than an acre or two of already-occupied land quickly riled up the Edwardsville citizenry to the extent that one of them exercised the constitutional right to bear arms and fired upon SIU survey aircraft--which did not help the University's PR.... Among my earliest memories of this campus are two: first, an intrepid, pastoral commencement held among the bullrushes along Route 157, just south of the present campus entrance, in the presence of then Governor William Stratton (if you think parking is a problem now, you should have seen that evening shuffle); and second, the distant sight of enormous construction cranes, sticking up in a late winter rain like local Eiffel Towers, as I rode the bus up Route 111, back to Alton from a teaching assignment at East St. Louis. Once in a while I shared the seat with one of my East St. Louis students who had no other way of having a conference with his circuit-riding professor except to ride the bus with him to Alton--and then ride back to East St. Louis--alone, but stocked with such wisdom as I could supply him. He was going and I was coming back, and "that was good both going and coming back"--as Robert Frost said about swinging on birches.

No one who was present when this campus finally opened for serious intellectual business on Thursday, September 23, 1965, at 7:00 a.m., blunt, will ever forget the mud, the absence of paved walks, the nonchalance about parking facilities (cars lined both sides of the road clear out to Route 157), the absence of a single curve in the rectilinear construction (except for the "intolerable touches of art" in the whimsical water tower and the inspired parabola of the "hairpin drive," both of which, along with hundreds of fir trees, still save us from "going straight"), the virtually total abstinence from either classroom windows or lecterns for the professoriat, the array of Bauhaus-like food-vending machines in the improvised lunchroom in the basement of Lovejoy Library (more or less where Textbook Rental was, the last time I looked), and repeated rumors of both a staircase that rose to a blank wall and of a room to which there was no entrance. "Kafka," we said, "thou shouldst be living at this hour!"

These, of course, are the mere banana skins that await anybody who takes a giant

step forward on a noble course. But I remember some other things--of a different sort. Let me cite a single example. I had always been charmed by the exquisite democracy displayed in the venue of university-wide committee meetings in the early 1960s when we were still Carbondale's fledgling. For years we had met precisely halfway between Edwardsville and Carbondale--in Marissa at Orr's Restaurant (now, alas, with the Great Chef in the Sky). But soon the late President Delyte Morris, whose fondest dream this campus was, and who had a penchant for operating on a grand scale, laid on a fleet of small aircraft and one redoubtable DC-3; and thereafter such committee meetings were held on alternate campuses through the good offices of (among others) a maroon two-engined, nine-passenger Beechcraft. One of my sharpest memories is of flying back from Carbondale to Bethalto Airport at night, when suddenly the pilot altered his course so we could fly directly over what were then the two single buildings of the new Edwardsville campus. All at once the John Mason Peck Classroom Building and the Elijah P. Lovejoy Library, their severe straight lines now softened by distance and bathed in light radiating out through non-classroom windows, gleamed like enormous jewels in the darkness of the night air....

Somehow the picture seemed symbolic of what we were trying to do in those early days. Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit, wrote the Roman poet Vergil: "Perhaps someday remembering this will be a pleasure." And indeed it is.

25th Anniversary of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

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