Now We Shall Visit Charles Nichols in His Home on West Lovell Street

Western Michigan University

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Ed: Good evening, Charles.

C: Good evening, Ed.

Ed: How do you feel about retiring after all these years? I understand that you have been connected with this university since its founding in 1903.

C: Yes, I’ve been here since then all right, but the University hasn’t.

Ed: Say, that’s true. In fact, you’re one of the first to retire from Western Michigan University. Tell us about some of the changes you’ve seen here in more than half a century.

C: All’s changed since then. There wasn’t a single building here when I joined the school over at Vine Street. First it was the Normal, then the Teachers’ College, then the College of Education, then Western Michigan College, and now the University. We had to change the name, I guess. Our rate of growth was far from normal.

Ed: Hmm, yes, well, Charles. Let’s see now. You are in manual training, aren’t you?

C: That’s another name we’ve changed, Ed. We call it Industrial Arts, sounds more cultural.

Ed: I’ve heard fine reports of your high standards for workmanship and safety. Do you have a sample of your work with you there?

C: Well, I do believe in quality material and work. You take this chair now. This is really substantial. See these double stretchers? And this is a steam-bent back. And down underneath there’s corner blocks with four screws and glued.

Ed: Did you build that chair, Charles?

C: Yes, and most of the rest of this furniture. I’ve tried to get them to adopt chairs something like this for the class-rooms up at the Normal, er, College, I mean, University. With these there wouldn’t be all those broken backs that chairs on the new campus have. You can’t beat a steam-bent back and corner blocks with four screws and glued.

Ed: Why haven’t they used your chair, Charles? It certainly appears to be substantial.

C: Trouble is, Lydia says the chair is too heavy.

Ed: Well, how heavy is it?

C: Pshaw, a husky man can move it all by himself. A little weight’s better for the class-room anyhow. Wouldn’t have to fasten it down to keep things in order.
Ed: Isn't that an example of the work in your classes, that taboret? Seems to me I made one of those in manual training when I was a boy.

C: You're right, Ed. As I was saying a minute ago, almost everything's changed, but not this pattern. It's like one of the verities. You take good material, good design, and good workmanship that we always tried for in my classes, and you have something that lasts. This taboret, now, just as solid as ever. (He leans on taboret and it collapses)

Ed: Oh, oh, there, Charles. Are you all right?

C: Shucks, yes. I forgot. I just took the screws out of that piece to do a little re-finishing.

Ed: I was going to say, Charles, in talking of all the changes, that I don't see that you have changed much. You still have your hair, and it's not even gray.

C: Yes, I guess I can thank my ancestors for that. But the changing times have got me, too. You know a nickel's not worth as much as it used to be.

Ed: That's not true of you, Charles. Even with inflation.

C: Well, I don't know. My work being what it was in the shop, the fellows always did kid me some about wooden nickels.

Ed: Not all of your skill was in manual arts, Charlie. I have heard something of your musical eminence, also.

C: It's all right to have heard of it. Yes, I really enjoyed playing with Western's bands and orchestras and the Kalamazoo Symphony in the old days. Harold Blair and I used to play with them all.

Ed: What was your instrument, Charles? Not the musical saw, was it?

C: No, I separated my music from my work. I didn't even build musical chairs. Why, I played both the trumpet end the bassoon; in the later years, it was mostly the bassoon.

Ed: How about giving us a sample of your playing tonight?

C: Can't do that, Ed. I belong to the carpenter's union. Our unions have an agreement not to horn in on each other's rackets.

Ed: Well, I'm sorry about that. I hear you're the original do-it-yourselfer. You've painted your house, built your furniture, laid your driveway, tuned your motors, and so on. What kind of a project do you have on now?

C: Right now I'm building a cottage that ought to keep me busy quite a while after I leave school.

Ed: Where is it located?

C: Up north a ways, up on Elk Lake. Doesn't seem quite right for a mason like me to have a cottage on Elk Lake.
Ed: So you're a Mason. How about politics, do you have any party preference?

C: I'm a Republican, somewhat old style. Individualism! That's what I believe in instead of all this social paternalism. Let a man stand on his own feet and do his own work. That's what I say. In school, too.

Ed: Good! I meant to inquire about Mrs. Nichols. Is she where we can meet her?

C: No, she isn't. I had to leave her up at the lake for a few days to finish the roof before everything gets soaked.

Ed: How does that fit in with your political views, Charlie?

C: This is a different category entirely. This is family sharing.

(knock at door)

Excuse me, Ed. I'll see who's here. (opens door) Oh, hello, Mrs. Jones.

Mrs. J: Mr. Nichols, I see you're busy, so I'll not stop a minute. I just wanted to thank you for all the help you've given young Bill in fixing up our porch. I know now that you never for a moment intended to send that statement you mentioned.

C: (embarrassed) Oh, pshaw, that was nothing, Mrs. Jones, just advice which is always available for nothing.

Mrs. J: You know it was far more than advice, and I am most grateful to you. Good night, now. (leaves, closes door)

C: A most inopportune call, Ed. Sorry to interrupt your program.

Ed: Not at all, Charles. I'm beginning to understand what you mean by "rugged individualism". By the way, though, I never did hear about your safety record in the shop.

C: Yes, I've been particular to practice and teach safety. With power tools, you know, even one slip is too many. I've always had the boys think a process through and then practice it without the power before trying a new step. Of course, it's partly luck, but I've never had a serious accident. (knocks on wood)

Ed: That's a marvelous record. Congratulations!

C: I had a close call the other day. A fellow rushed into my office to say that one of my students had cut off a finger in the buzz saw.

Ed: I hope it was an exaggerated report.

C: Well, yes and no.

Ed: What do you mean?

C: Well, the boy unfortunately cut off a finger all right -- but he wasn't one of my students.
The telephone rings. Charles answers

C: Hello. Yes, this is Charles. Yes, Mike. (pleased)
Sure, I'd be glad to furnish you as many of my chairs as you need. (listens) (less pleased, but not unhappy) Oh, I see.
Well, I'll get a half dozen of them ready for you for the fall.

Ed: Good news, eh Charles? You sold some of your chairs, didn't you?

C: Yes, but it's not just as I planned. Mike Gary wants some for a new course his department is starting in the fall. It's called "Practical Weight Lifting."