CONVOCATION ADDRESS
MAY 9, 1972

President Cowan, Monsignor Maher, Mr. Bozell, distinguished members of the administration and faculty, graduating class of 1972, ladies and gentlemen, friends:

You do me great honor by permitting me these last words. When first we met the tower and the mall were new. A Texan was president of the United States. Man had not yet walked the moon. The Sharpstown bank was only a place for the deposit of funds.

When next we met it was to consider the History of the Americans. Those golden moments were preserved to posterity by one Richard Maxwell in a sculpture which yet reposes within the precincts of the Braniff Building. That work shows three students -- at least one of whom is of your number -- in a Lynch Hall setting. Their faces reflect a thirsting after knowledge and there is implicit in their postures an irresistible drive toward wisdom. It is the attitude I was accustomed to see thrice weekly; it is the way I shall remember you.

I appear in behalf of these gifted professors who labored to share with you the best that man has thought and written. It is my obligation to say something that might bring you closer to the understanding they sought to impart. Put in lawyers' language: it is my privilege and responsibility to make the closing argument, to sum up.
This is no easy task. There are others here far better
diated. And much of what I am able to state from the small
wisdom that is mine I must put in narrative form.

My approach has to be that of Merlin when Arthur saw his
kingdom shattered and himself estranged from those he loved
most, Lancelot and Guinnevere. Arthur asked Merlin to explain
what had happened and Merlin answered with a question, "How
did it all begin?"

By knowing its origin we can know its qualities.

So if I were asked to state the truest things I knew I
might speak first of the presence of the past. I might direct
your attention to how much of what we are comes from those who
passed this way on some yesterday, recent or remote.

I would probably cast the larger part of my response in
parable.

I might tell you of an old man who was not always old,
but was old in my time. Of a long ago Sunday when my mother
took me to see him because he was her grandfather and had been
a soldier and a ranger and a frontier marshal. And how she talked
of him all the way to Decatur, a substantial forty mile trip
by gravel road in a black model A Ford. And how I saw a big
man of great age, wearing a white gunfighter's moustache, and a
wide brimmed black hat, sitting in a rocking chair on his front
porch. Of how he asked my name and how old I was and had dif-
ficulty hearing my answer. Of the long, shouted conversation
as one of his daughters leaned across his shoulder and explained
which of his grandchildren had borne me. Of how finally he
seemed to be satisfied of my identity and promptly lost interest in me. He never smiled, an unsettling thing that implied dislike.

I explored the storm cellar and pitched rocks into the well which had not been used since he tied onto the Decatur water system, and looked at the chickens. My mother came regularly to the back door to caution me about my appearance.

It was some sort of family gathering. There were cousins present that I had not previously known. And one, who was older than the rest, took us around to the front yard and sought to impress the old man with a demonstration of centrifugal force. He ran some water into a bucket and began swinging it in a circle. A portion of the arc was above his head, yet the water remained in its container. It was a dazzling demonstration.

I was unacquainted with centrifugal force. My cousin did not know its proper name. His explanation was that the water was not disturbed because of the "slinging around."

The old man watched with interest but evidenced no emotion. My mother appeared on the front porch and warned me against becoming disheveled.

Then the cousin invited me to try the bucket trick. Everyone backed away. I did as he had done, with a significant difference. I did not have confidence in centrifugal force. I hesitated as the bucket neared the top of the circle, producing a bad result. I was drenched.

The immediate lesson was that one should not attempt to employ centrifugal force unless he believes in it. I would
I understand later that there was a broader rule, that one who does not truly believe in a thing is apt to misuse it, and, realizing a bad result, erroneously feel betrayed by it.

Of course, I did not ponder all this in that sodden moment. I knew only that every cousin had disappeared and my mother was handling my arm roughly, unsympathetically. The only redeeming feature of the situation was that the old man laughed as I was dragged past.

His name was Lucien Thompson Owens, born in Kentucky and brought to Wise County at a tender age. He was a sixteen year old Confederate soldier, married a Cherokee girl named Tennessee, was a member of a raiding company, and followed among others, the Comanche war party that massacred the Babbs and carried away their children. In later years he would draw a pension for service in the Indian Wars. On his application -- which was designed for use by veterans of wars with battles that had names -- in the space that asked where he had fought, he wrote, "wherever the trail led."

After Quanah Parker took his Quahadi Comanche onto the reservation at Fort Sill ninety-six years ago Owens became a peace officer. He bought a new six shooter, a .45 caliber Frontier Colt, that was the proudest possession of his life.

A fair share of bad men soujourne in and around Decatur, which may account for the call in a famous game of chance, "Fighter from Decatur" and the refrain "County Seat of Wise."

The trail herds passed through, headed for Abilene, Kansas. Therefore, there was always much to do to preserve the civilization that had been set down in Wise County.
Meanwhile Owens' family was increasing. Tennessee was having to raise the children in his extended absences as he trailed malefactors and took convicted felons horseback to Huntsville. Her daughters, in their old age, would talk of Tennessee's black hair, of her grace and her goodness.

The house burned and had to be rebuilt. A child died. Then responsible citizens of Sunset begged Owens' help in taming their town. A gang led by two brothers was harrassing the citizens. It was out of Owens' jurisdiction, in Montague County, but he buckled on the six shooter and went.

And one day the Hunter gang caught him afoot in the middle of the main street and tried to ride him down. As they charged, he shot one of the brothers and dragged the other off his horse. Then using the man as a shield, he retreated. Backed up in a corner outside the depot and keeping Hunter in front of him he shouted for the telegrapher to wire Dan Waggoner to bring help from Decatur. The gang had decided to wait him out. Waggoner, who would own the old Max Morgan ranch, where the grass was never let to grow upon, had a freight car hooked onto a locomotive, filled it with a couple of dozen adventure-loving souls, and sped to Sunset to take Owens and his prisoner.

Later Mrs. Hunter, somewhat deranged after the death of one son and the incarceration of another, came to Owens' home one night to kill him. He reasoned his way out of that.

Tennessee died in childbirth, but the older children were able to care for the little ones. By the time he remarried they had homes of their own.
The years passed and the world changed. Owens developed such a bad limp from the weight of the six-shooter on his hip or the cold of the metal that one of his sons got him a shoulder holster.

And the time came when he was too old to be keeping the peace. The frontier was long since closed, and he and the pistol were no longer necessary for the protection of civilization. Not only did he have grandchildren, but he had great grandchildren. So he sat on the porch and whittled and talked. He went down to watch the train come in. The world was filling up with people, almost every one of them younger than he was.

He read the Bible and pondered Ecclesiastes. He marked the prophet's pronouncement, that "a generation passeth away and another cometh, but the earth abideth forever," and that "All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full." And he thought on the phenomena that John Kennedy would speak of two generations later, "There is a rhythm to life, and it ebbs and flows."

He cleaned the six-shooter regularly. He put new grips on it. And whenever Mrs. Owens wanted a chicken killed he would step to the back door and decapitate it with a single shot. The pistol was about the only thing that connected him with the important time of his life.

His eyes were going bad on him. And his hearing. His hands were unsteady at times. Then one day there was to be company for dinner. Mrs. Owens, before she trooped off to church, said she would need three chickens. Owens sat on the porch and listened to the singing of the Sunday School children
from the church across the street. And he decided to do his shooting before worship services began. He went to the back door and shot four times before he got the first chicken, and gave up on the others.

That afternoon the old man gave the six-shooter to my uncle. A few weeks later he died.

My uncle looked upon the pistol much as Owens had. His was a frontier generation also. He kept it in the glove compartment of his automobile in the event someone attempted to rob him or trifle with him. And when he was full of years he gave it to me. It has been in my safety deposit box ever since.

Fortunately, in my time others are charged with the forcible maintenance of civilization.

History has been my way into the important questions of the nature and propensities of man and the dimensions of life. Most of those questions remain open for me, and pursuit of answers affords me great satisfaction in that stillly might watches which seem reasonably satisfied.

But I have made two judgments. First, the well-lived life consists in finding something to do that is worth doing and then wearing yourself out doing it.

Secondly, the goal to be sought is that requested by Solomon, the understanding heart.

Each of you will contribute to the world in a fashion which will enrich -- or perhaps impoverish -- those who come after you. You have already commenced these investments in society, as witness those who posed for Maxwell's statuary. For untold generations
all who gaze upon those rapt figures will know, and be illuminated and elevated by the glories of the required survey course. By virtue of your contributions at these thousand acres, you will always find a part of yourself here.

In behalf of this faculty and this administration, thank you for the privilege of participating in your quest these four years. Good luck in all you undertake.