Excerpt from The Autobiography of Lewis Elmer Sims, 1934

It was decided that I should go to college in the fall, so I gave a great deal of attention to school catalogues. Prof. Swinney said if I would go to his school at Milton that they would take his credit for the work I had done, without examinations. Perhaps this would have been best for me, but I am not certain the way things turned out. The school seemed too far away and I finally decided to go to the Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois.

I presume I was helped in this decision by a Methodist minister who spoke highly of the school and its president Dr. Charles Fowler; then, it was close to Chicago and the Great Lake Michigan, and not so far from home.

We had engaged a room and board at Dempster Hall which was in charge of a Mr. Wood, a Methodist Minister with whom we made arrangements. And now has come the time when I am to leave the old home. The old black team is standing at the door, hitched to the buggy with my trunk in behind and waiting to take me to the railroad station at Chillicothe. The idea of going to college gave me a thrill, but it was mingled with a sadness at leaving the old home, from where I had been absent only a few nights in my life, and where I had spent so many happy days. Looking back over the sixty years since that time, it seems to me to have been an ideal home for a boy like me.

Bidding my father "Goodbye" at the station at Chillicothe, I got on the train, took my seat, and off we started. I had never been on a train before and when it got under way, it seemed to me to be going too fast. But I soon got used to it and enjoyed the ride. We had to change at Bureau and take the train from the "West" which was four hours late. After getting on, it began to rain. I had fully expected to reach Evanston in day time and get settled in my room before dark, but it was dark and raining when I reached Chicago.

I took a transfer which read "At Wells St. depot", and when the driver asked me where I was going I replied, "To Atwell's St.", with the accent on the first syllable. Again he asked me where I was going to get off and I made the same reply, "Atwell's St."; then a man at his side said, "He means at Wells St.", and then I saw the mistake I had made.

When I got on the train for Evanston, I met a couple of young men who said they were going there and that they roomed at Heck Hall which was given over to those who were preparing for the ministry. They said I could follow them to the Hall and they would see what could be done for me for the night. I think it must have been about ten o'clock when we got off the train at Evanston. They ran, and I followed in the dark, carrying my heavy satchel. I was uncertain about the street and was nearly exhausted when we reached the Hall for it was quite a distance from the depot. I stayed all night with one of the boys while the other one got a bed somewhere else. I thought this was very kind of them. I do not remember eating anything; I must have brought something from home.

The next morning I started for my boarding place. They had codfish gravy for breakfast, but I could not eat anything. The morning was foggy and I was completely turned around. The waves of Lake Michigan were roaring, but it seemed to me they were on the west and that I was
going south instead of north which I knew was not correct for Demster Hall was at the north side of the campus (it was burned a long time ago).

This was the way it seemed to me when I went to see about my registering. I showed them the credits given me by Prof. Swinney, but they did not seem to meet the requirements; I believe only one professor passed me on them. The first thing they did was to send me to the blackboard for an examination. I had not expected this and had not looked into some of the subjects for a long time. I did not get along very well. I had supposed I would have no difficulty getting into the Freshman class excepting the Latin which I understood could be made up in the preparatory department. I thought I had sufficient mathematics in advance, to make up for the Latin. Some of the professors conditioned me for a short time, gave me time to review and have the condition removed which in some of them I was able to do. Although I had studied some away ahead of the class, I was required to conform to the schedule and take some of the studies over, which was not a bad thing. I undertook two years of Latin in one, but it was too much for me. I succeeded in the first year but not in the second. I also took up German and French and studied them for about two years. I never was very good in languages and it seems to me now that the most of things I studied were a loss to me, although I think I passed in them. Latin has always been a help to me on account of its derivations.

I took election lessons under Prof. Cumnock; joined the Adelphi Literary Society. There I learned to debate and the rules of Parliamentary law which has always been a great help to me, especially in presiding over some meetings which I have had to do.

In coming out from my entrance examinations and my interview with the professors, I certainly was blue and discouraged and wished that I had taken the suggestion of Prof. Swinney and gone up to Milton College. When I got out of doors, the sun was shining and the lake was now in the right place, on the East. North was north and South was south and so it was with my school work. It soon straightened out and I got acquainted with the ways of the college and everything moved along smoothly. I had a chance to take up writing and made a great improvement in my handwriting, but have lost it later when required to write rapidly.

There were no so called college activities in those days. The only thing they did have, was a baseball team but it was of a private nature. The great men of the college were those who excelled in orations, debates and declamations.

I had only been in Evanston a short time when one day I looked across the campus and saw my father coming toward me. It was a great and happy surprise. He stayed until the next day and then went home. He had come to see how I was getting along. This was only the beginning of a habit he kept up through the remainder of his life. Whenever I changed my location he was sure to come and see me and find out how it was with me. This is one of the treasures I hold of his memory.

At Christmas time I went home and everyone seemed glad to see me—and I was surely glad to see them all. ______.

After the holidays I returned to Evanston. On my way to Chicago,
the newspapers contained an account of the death of Mr. and Mrs. P. P. Bliss the noted composers and singers of many gospel hymns which were just beginning to be sung at the Moody meetings. They were both burned to death in a railroad wreck at Atlanta, Ohio. It was a very tragic and heart rending accident.

For some reason, the next day after my arrival at my boarding house, I was taken with a terrible fit of homesickness. I believe that it was the worst that I have ever felt before or since. It seemed for awhile I could not possibly stand it—that I must go home. It was not long before I was over it. I expect that I had too good a time while at home.

I now joined a boarding club in which the boys, united, paid, I think, fifty cents each to some woman who furnished the house and did the cooking and also gave one of the members his board for taking charge of the buying and keeping the accounts; we voted each week, the kind of fare we wanted and divided up the cost among us. It made our board very reasonable. The name of our club was named after the woman who run it. It was called the Tubman Club.

Along in January, a three weeks revival was held in the college chapel, led by President Dr. A. M. Fowler; at this time Northwestern University was under the control of the Methodist Church. The revival was conducted in the usual way of the Methodist, calling for converts to come to the front. Now I had many times passed through just such revivals in the Methodist church at home, but they could never get me to go up forward and acknowledge that I was such a terrible sinner as they represented us all to be. I thought it was all right for some of them for they needed to do so but did not think it applied to me. So I was put on the list of the lost. Up to this time I had never made a public profession of religion, but I always attended church and Sunday school, sang in the choir, and took an interest in the church generally and considered myself a Christian. As I did not respond to their call they got after me, but I refused to go forward. Finally one of the boys followed me to my room after the meeting and we had a long talk. I told him I thought I was a Christian, but did not want to go forward. This seemed to satisfy him and he told some of the rest about me and I was taken in as one of them, but I thought I would join the Church at home the next opportunity, which I did the next summer. I united with the Congregational Church and was baptized at the same time by M. S. Hall, the minister. I was just past my twentieth birthday. I have since that time been a member of the Methodist Church, but for the last thirty-three years, a Presbyterian.

Nothing occurred out of the ordinary, as I remember, until spring when I was taken sick. I had not been feeling well for some time; could not eat. Went to see a doctor with the usual result—a prescription and "come and see me again." I got no better and could not attend classes. I made up my mind that if I were going to be sick, I had better be home. I had never been sick before. So I packed up my belongings and started for home. ———

When I reached home my father sent for a Doctor and I had a siege of typhoid fever. I must have taken it from the water we used at the rooming house. We used to go to the lake to get it. It was cold an
clear and delicious which is said to be the case with water that had bad germs in it. I was sick quite a while, and of course, the Doctor had to come every day to see me.

It was thought best that I should not return to Evanston that fall, but stay and teach during the winter and the next spring begin school where I left off when I was taken sick.

A man who was living on a part of the old farm which my father still owned was a director and wanted me to come and teach their school. I was to receive $10.00 per month for the first two months and $45.00 for the four winter months.

My school commenced the first of September. Not many attended the first two months, especially during the season when nearly all the children stayed home gathering the potato crop. But in the winter, they came, all ages, some as old as myself. I think I had forty-four enrolled, in rather a small school house.

During the winter I was teaching, the young folks of our community organized a literary society which met every Friday night at the home of some of the members. While at college I had become very much interested in the literary society to which I belonged and had a pretty good knowledge of how such societies were conducted. I wrote the constitution and by-laws, providing for regular elected officers and that all business should be conducted according to parliamentary law. There was a program committee who arranged for every meeting two weeks in advance. Among other things there was always a debate by four members on some question, with chosen judges to decide on the merits of the debate. We used to get quite enthusiastic about these debates.

A week after my school closed, found me once more at Northwestern; I took my place in the class of 1879 instead of 1878 where I left off the year before. I found board and room in a private home. My roommate was a young man named Chamberlin. He expected to take up the study of law and spent much time practicing oratory. I still have his picture, but I do not know what became of him.

Another young man who boarded here was a Mr. Van Patton who was in his senior year and expected to become a minister. His mother came up to visit him and she told me she thought it foolish for one to take the Junior and Senior years in college; that they had better spend the time studying the profession in which they expected to enter; for they would be through about the time they were graduating from college. I often thought of what she told me after I was compelled on account of sickness to leave college in my Junior year, and shortly after took up the study of law. In my case I believe that she was about right.

My vacations were spent on the farm helping with the work and in the fall I went back to college and continued the whole year. I do not remember anything out of the ordinary happening during the year. It was the year that we elected a new president and as I was just past my twenty-first birthday, I voted for the first time and voted for Hayes and Wheeler. I have voted at every presidential elections since that
time, but my candidate was not always elected.

During the entire year, I roomed with a young man named Clough. He went home at vacation time, was taken sick, and soon died.

I spent my vacation at home and returned to college in the fall, a member of the Junior class. It was not long after when I was again taken sick and had to go home. I was very discouraged and when I left, I did not think I would ever return. After I was home and began to feel better, my father came home one day, and said that they wanted a man teacher in a school in La Prarie Township about seven miles north east of Lawnridge. They would pay $50.00 per month for a three month school, which was considered pretty good wages in those days, and I accepted the position.