



**Missouri State**  
UNIVERSITY

## “Our Finest Hour” August 10th, 2020

Former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Harry Truman were both early risers. President Carter still is. He details what he considers to be the best part of the day in his collection of childhood memories about growing up in rural Georgia in his book *An Hour before Daylight*. President Truman insisted on having high level meetings early in the morning because he thought the day was half gone by 10:00 AM. Many of our most famous military leaders spent entire careers developing pre-dawn deployment strategies.

Some of us, likewise, are early risers, while others prefer to work well into the night and then start the next day “at the crack of noon,” rather than the “crack of dawn.” And, I guess some “burn the candle at both ends.” So, when Rose & Sharon asked several weeks back what time our August 14, 2020, College Meeting would begin, I paused to consider what most COE faculty and staff might prefer. Personally, the earlier the better for me. . . .

Don’t know if my early morning regimen is a matter of nature or nurture. Either way, I can’t ever remember feeling good about getting a late start to the day. My earliest recollections of “early to bed, early to rise,” were when I was about five years old. The routine actually began late the night before. Grandad would come into the farm house by way of the back door sometime between 11:30 PM and midnight after his shift at the Frisco West Shops. I remember hearing the clank of his black, rectangular lunch box on the tiny kitchen counter as his hand slipped out of the handle atop the curved top so he could purposefully move on. The aroma of greasy metal that had built up on his face, arms, and clothes since late afternoon was evidence he had been turning railway wheels and axles for hours. I heard each step across the creaky wood floor from the kitchen to the dining room to the narrow staircase where he made his way up to his and Grandma’s bedroom. Grandad had fashioned the room, actually captured it, from the attic several years prior. Never really finished, the room was just making due with a dormer window and a 100-watt light bulb dangling from the ceiling with a pull string switch. The floor was Frisco boxcar three inch tongue and groove yellow pine from the scrap yard Grandad frequently pillaged after his shift. The walls were some type of light brown, pressed cardboard-like material about a quarter of an inch thick. No heat, no air conditioning. I think Twentieth Century Fox must have filmed the *Diary of Anne Frank* up there.

I would climb out of my dirty white, lead-painted crib (now an illegal artifact that, if used today, would result in a call from the DFS) and crawl up the steep stairs (that don’t meet today’s building codes) and get into bed with Grandma and Grandad. Don’t really know when Grandma had first put me to bed before we were greeted with Grandad’s late night arrival, but I am sure it was not long after the sun had gone down and the old 1920s era lap board farm house began to grow dark. And I don’t know exactly how early Grandma was really up each morning, but it was well before daylight and it was long enough to allow her to “fix” her hair, put on her day dress, read her scriptures, and start cooking. It was the aroma of the Jewel Tea Man’s Sunshine Coffee from a glass jar percolating on the stove that first signaled to Grandad and me that it was time to head downstairs. Often, too, the pungent odor of cast iron crappie frying in lard meandered its way up the stairs and into our drowsy nostrils. Other times it was ham and eggs or oatmeal and buttermilk biscuits, always biscuits no matter what, because we needed something to hold Grandma’s blackberry jelly she had sealed in a Mason jar with paraffin.

I crawled out from under the feather mattress and onto Grandad's shoulders, so we could "follow our noses" to breakfast. He walked cautiously down the steep, narrow, staircase with an arm extended to the wall so he could slide his hand along as we descended. There was no handrail of course. As we approached the last step, the one bigger and steeper than all the rest because it presented itself to a door to the dining room, Grandad would stoop forward and lean a bit sideways, and I would duck as far onto his right shoulder as I could, so we would plop out of the situation without hitting the top of the yellow pine door frame hosting the open glass-handled door as we thudded to the floor. Once safely aground, we joined Grandma in the kitchen where coffee and fish or ham or eggs or oatmeal were awaiting us along with those steaming hot buttermilk biscuits. It was always still dark outside. We ate beneath the kitchen light in the dark. I listened to Grandma and Grandad talk in the light of the dark. And then, magically, the world began to come to light a little at a time. After a while we would be outside on the back porch assembling garden tools, or woodworking tools, or fishing poles, or whatever was needed for the day. Then, we would pause in reverence not unlike the crowd at a baseball game observing the Star-Spangled Banner to admire the sunrise. Some were unimpressively clouded, and some were ordinary, but some were also spectacular. A pastel sky ablaze with rosy streams of life is not a bad way to begin a day.

When I told Rose and Sharon about a month ago to plan for an early COE Fall Faculty and Staff Meeting on Friday morning, August 14, 2020, they wanted to know what I meant by early. Something tells me if I had said 6:00 AM – 8:00 AM, I would have been talking to myself . . . again. We decided to go with the standard start-to-the-workday, i.e., 8:00 AM. This will still be early for some, spot on for others, and late for me and Denise Cunningham.

I do very much hope you can all participate in the College meeting webinar this Friday. Frank and Clif will join us, and we will introduce our new faculty and staff. Dr. Tinkler will manage participants much the same as the University has managed the Town Hall meetings this summer.

My message will focus on adapting to the environment. Will discuss the many plans, policies, and processes we will employ this fall as we work our way through the semester on a day by day basis.

Like always, I was up before daylight this morning. But today is special. On this day 159 years ago, Grandad's grandad was part of General Nathaniel Lyon's pre-dawn column in position north of the Confederate camp at Wilson's Creek. General Lyon would soon be shot from his horse and his body carried to the Ray House, the first Union general killed in the Civil War. A Lithograph depicting the tragic event hangs in an upstairs bedroom here at the ranch. It was given to me by my English 111 professor, Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney, who also had an ancestor wounded at Wilson's Creek. Dr. Sweeney was the professor who encouraged me to stop studying business and focus on literature. I did.

Standing in reverence on the back porch here at Deerfield upon Fellows, I watch in silence as the dark turns to light. Then, bright pastels emerge atop the oaks surrounding the lake. Streams of pinkish blue and purple are created against a backdrop of puffy white clouds: a spectacular sunrise. Some things are hard to forget; some things should never be forgotten.

Keep Calm and Join Our Colleagues This Friday at 8:00 AM,

David