

"A Hunger Strike at Western Maryland"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

I recently attended a dinner of the Western Maryland College History Majors Club. In my after dinner remarks I noted that the catered dinner was superior to what had been served at my alma mater. The students, however, made it clear that they did not always eat this well. Seventy-five years ago some other students got fed up with the food as recorded in the January 26, 1924 issue of the Democratic Advocate newspaper:

DID NOT FANCY PICKLED SOUSE

FOUR HUNDRED WESTERN MARYLAND STUDENTS REFUSE TO EAT MEALS AT INSTITUTION.

"When the cooks and stewards at Western Maryland College began to say it with souse a week ago, several groups of students got up from the tables and left the dining hall. Two days later the entire student body of about 400 launched a hunger strike.

It was on Saturday, January 13, at supper time that they served the pickled souse that broke the students' patience. Sunday passed quietly but threateningly. No one wanted open warfare on Sunday but on Monday, January 15, the college dining hall echoed to the footfall of waiters wandering among empty tables. Breakfast was cooked for a student body that never came to eat it, and there was no use cooking lunch because by lunch time the signs of revolt were unmistakable and a formal protest by the students was being prepared in writing.

Rev. Dr. A. N. Ward president of the college, declared nothing in the situation was worth talking about. He said all the unpleasantness had been fermented by a handful of unworthy students. He admitted that they had had some following, but laid that to the "mob tendency" among human beings, especially youths.

Students who have been asked about it agree, however, that the hunger strike was not a prank by a handful of students, but a serious protest by the entire student body. Dr. Ward himself seemed to regard it as serious enough for investigation and hinted that there would be expulsions and suspensions.

"I feel like spanking some of them," he said. "We can't set a table like Delmonico's here because we haven't money enough. When students pay \$400 a year for everything, including room, board and tuition, they can't expect fancy meals. We do try to give them plenty of wholesome food. Our records show that they gain an average of five pounds in weight between the beginning of the fall term and the holidays."

Most of the students will not talk freely about the hunger strike, and it seems to be a fact that things have settled down and the causes for revolt, if there were any causes, eliminated since Monday. But they declared their objection was not so much to the food as to the foreign bodies it contained and the way it was cooked.

They made this clear to Dr. Ward, they say. When they came into supper on January 13 and saw that they were to have pickled souse they decided things had gone far enough. The strike order spread rapidly through the college but nothing happened on Sunday, Monday morning, however no one appeared for breakfast in the dining hall and at lunch time too the tables were empty.

In the meantime Dr. Ward had consented to meet a committee of students in the college Young Men's Christian Association rooms. The committee is said to have consisted of two members of each class and one from the preparatory school. Dr. Ward the students say, seemed surprised to learn that they had not been getting more green vegetables to eat, and promised to correct that. He is said however, to have made a valiant defense of pickled souse, pointing out that it was an excellent and respected dish, to which the students replied: "You may like pickled souse Dr. Ward, but no one in college does."

Dr. Ward defended, too, the occasional presence of extraneous substances in the food and was met, it is said, with the agreement that occasionally such unfortunate things could not be helped, but that when there was a hair in the butter six days a week, something ought to be done about it.

Mrs. Lilly, the college dietitian, gave out samples of the dining-hall menus January 22 at Dr. Ward's request. Last Sunday for breakfast the students had eggs and bacon, cereal, fruit, bread, butter and coffee; for dinner broiled steak, gravy, spinach, sweet potatoes, corn lemon meringue pie, bread and butter; for supper, cold ham, cheese, crackers, fresh rolls and butter, preserves, pickle, cake and cocoa.

A mid-week menu selected at random by Mrs. Lilly from her schedule featured scrapple for breakfast, fried bologna for lunch and fried fresh sausage for dinner. Dr. Ward declared that all the food for the college was purchased in Baltimore and was of the best possible quality. "Of course," he said, "we can't give them all they want, for they would never stop eating, but we give them enough."

Student comment on the menus was that they read well, but that the breakfast bacon was burned, the bologna thin and tough, the cereal a mysterious mush and the sausage an unfamiliar-looking mixture."

Photo caption: Western Maryland College was the scene of a "hunger strike" in January 1924 when students protested being served pickled souse. Historical Society of Carroll County post card collection.