

# **PROFESSOR H. GORDON VAN SICKLE: HISTORIAN, SCHOLAR, MINISTER, FRIEND**

**J. ALTON TEMPLIN**

**Editor's Note:** The late Professor H. Gordon Van Sickle (1910-1975) was particularly outstanding as a teacher. Although a memorial issue of this journal was published in the spring of 1975, the suddenness of his death did not make it possible to include a thorough survey of his career. Meanwhile Professor Templin has had opportunity to go over the materials in some detail and with the care merited. Students and colleagues of Van will be particularly grateful for this paper, especially since some of the information will be new to them, given Van's inclinations toward modesty and the fact that his career centered on the classroom and what happened there in the minds of students.

For almost a quarter of a century students at The Iliff School of Theology knew H. Gordon Van Sickle as "Mr. History." He was popular in student discussions, he was much in demand as a lecturer in the community, and he was an active churchman. Everyone knew of his incomparable ability to make history relive in the classroom as he embellished the facts with quotations and interpretations not usually found in text books. Through his narrative he made people and situations real, contemporary and relevant. Before he developed severe health problems he mixed well with all students, especially at the ping pong table where he had few peers. Even when ping pong ceased to be a part of his curriculum, he was a friend and interested counselor to all who sought his wisdom. He was registrar in charge of student records from 1958 to 1972. At Iliff he quickly won a place even in the hearts of those who did not think they were interested in the history of their own heritage. Who was this professor whom everyone loved and usually called "Van," who came to Iliff in 1952 at the age of 42, and remained to his death in 1975 just before he would have been 65?<sup>1</sup>

## **FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY EDUCATION**

While Gordon Van Sickle was a student at Yale Divinity School he and his wife, Loretta, were looking through the library one day and made an interesting discovery. They found a 50-year-old geneo-

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<sup>1</sup>For the information in this study of Professor Van Sickle we are indebted to Loretta Van Sickle who put all scrapbooks, lectures, clippings, printed materials, and many personal letters at my disposal. Our thanks must go to her also for the time she spent in discussions about this material, and for the reminiscences which helped to reflect Van's exuberance for living and for study. This study benefits, also, from an interview with Van's mother on one of her trips to Denver.

logical study of the Van Sickle family.<sup>2</sup> As they studied it they were able to bring it up to date and to know the Van Sickle forebears four centuries back into history. The title "von" in German, or "van" in Dutch, probably indicates a family of the lesser nobility. Our English word "sickle" in its various spellings is related to the German "Sickel" or the Dutch "sikkel," the implement for the harvest of grain or hay. The coat of arms of the family includes this harvesting tool. We assume, therefore, that the name originated in the farming area of northern Germany.

The Von Sieckengen family was evidently from Saxony, and was traced back to the generation of Martin Luther. For reasons that are not recorded, they fled to the Netherlands late in the 16th century where the name was changed to Van Sycklin. Sometimes it was two words, and sometimes not; and the "S" was capitalized by only part of the descendants of the family, with the alternate spelling as Vansycklin. In the Netherlands they were members of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The earliest direct ancestor of Gordon van Sickle on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, nine generations back, was Ferdenandus Van Sycklin. He was born in the Netherlands in 1635, and came to this country as a teen-ager in 1652, settling in Kings County, Long Island, New Amsterdam, soon to become New York. This early settler married a Dutch woman, Eva Antonis Jansen Van Salee, who came from Haerlem, the Netherlands. This woman's grandfather had been a Dutch pirate who escaped to Salee, Morocco, shortly after 1600 and became a Muslim. In two generations family members migrated west—to Raritan, New Jersey, and spelled their name Van Sickelen. Gordon's great-great-great-grandfather, Ferdinand Van Sickelen of Virginia, fought in the Revolutionary War, while Daniel Ferdinand Van Sickle of Indiana, Gordon's great-grandfather, fought in the Civil War.

The birthplaces of the various generations tell the story of continued westward migration. Roy Scott Van Sickle, Gordon's father, was born in Illinois in 1880, and his eldest son, Harold Gordon, was born in Oklahoma on September 26, 1910. Actually, the parents were living in Denver, Colorado, as the time of Gordon's birth drew near. At the last minute they were called to Pond Creek, Oklahoma, because of illness in the family. Gordon was born at that time and stayed for one month in Oklahoma and then lived in Englewood and Denver

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<sup>2</sup>John W. Van Sickle, *A History of the Van Sickle Family in the United States of America* (Springfield, Ohio: published by the author, 1880, reprinted 1968). The author was Professor of Physical and Mental Hygiene in the American Eclectical Medical College, Springfield, Ohio, and Founder and Proprietor of "Van Sickle's Business College," also in Springfield.

until he was five and one-half years of age. There were four other sons born to Roy and Ethelyn Violet Van Sickle: Stanley, Carleton, Robert and Roy. Van's four brothers and his mother survive him.

During his early years Gordon grew as all other boys did, but one experience registered surprise for him. In Denver he took his first ride in an automobile when he was approximately two years old. He hardly believed it was real and is reported to have said, "Am Gordon really riding in an auto?" Even before he was old enough to go to school, so his mother reported, Gordon gave evidence of his later academic interests. He learned the alphabet and became curious about combinations of letters before he was taught to read and write. When he mastered the art of reading he practiced regularly, even to the chagrin of others. On one occasion a younger brother was anxious to play but Gordon was immersed in a book. The younger boy then went to his mother and demanded, "Make Gordon play with me!" In 1916 the family left Denver for Gordon's father's health. They lived in Dallas and New Orleans before settling finally in Beeville, Texas, in 1919. It was here that Gordon completed grammar school and graduated from the A. C. Jones High School in 1928.

#### LON MORRIS COLLEGE, 1928-1930

In the fall Gordon enrolled at Lon Morris Junior College at Jacksonville, Texas. He immediately developed his interest in his studies as well as in various extra-curricular activities. On March 5, 1930, during Gordon's second year *The Alexandrian*, the college newspaper, reported: "Van Sickle, who is prominent in religious organizations. . . received an ovation Monday morning when the announcement of his election was made to fellow students." The election to which the article referred was as President of the Student Volunteer Movement of the State of Texas. He was a pre-medical student preparing for the medical mission field at the time. Not only was Gordon involved with religious groups, but held the respect of other organizations as well. He was President of the school's Aeolian Choir, was captain of the tennis team, and President of the college department of the Epworth League as well as of the Life Service Band, an organization among students anticipating full-time work in the church. We must not think that he neglected his studies, however, for during his second year at Lon Morris he was also on the honor roll.

#### AN INTERLUDE

In June, 1930, after Gordon had completed two years of his education, his plans were changed. His father was ill, and since Gordon

was the oldest of the boys in the family, he became the breadwinner at the age of 20. This was during the depression when many people were out of work and employment was difficult to secure. Gordon worked at J. C. Penney's, in a grocery store, and one year he taught all grades in a small school a few miles out of Beeville. He also taught a W.P.A. night class in mathematics where his students were adult Mexican-Americans who remained his good friends. His long-range goals were not thwarted, however, for he became superintendent of the church school in his home-town church, and introduced several innovations which his older predecessor had frowned upon. During the same period of time he earned his local preacher's license granted by the District Conference. As this was before the merger, he was associated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

The need to work, and the deprivations of the depression, were not sufficient to keep all Van's enthusiasm in check, however. One of his adventures is reported in a newspaper article. In 1933 Gordon had never been in a big city, and had never traveled north of Oklahoma City, but he decided to visit the World's Fair (The Century of Progress) in Chicago. In May that year he hitch-hiked alone to the Windy City in five days, stayed a week, wrote details on many of the scientific exhibits he saw, and returned home having spent a total of \$25.

In May, 1935, Gordon and three Mexican-American youth began another adventure as they motored from their homes in southern Texas to Mexico City. The careful report which Gordon wrote back to his hometown newspaper was printed in four installments, each covering almost half a newspaper page. They were dated May 18, 1935, from Hotel Mexico in Mexico City. In the *first* article, published May 30, 1935, he described the three-day trip itself. This included reflections about some paved roads, some gravel, and some treacherous mountain trails hardly passable. They were stopped twice by rock slides and dynamite blasts in road construction, and were extra careful as the road meandered among the sheer cliffs. Van reported that the road was barely wide enough for one lane of traffic and was "unparalleled for its narrowness. . . . On one side we had the side of the mountain, on the other about 3,000 feet of fresh air resting on a foundation of very solid rock." They forded a river and ferried over others where the bridges were only in the planning stages. When they arrived at their destination they were 952 miles from Beeville. The three companions feared driving in such terrain, so Van had driven the whole distance, including some very late night and early morning experiences. He reported, "Road information is entirely vocal and likely to be un-

reliable. There are no signs whatever." He computed all distances in kilometers as well as miles and reminded the readers of the formula for converting one to the other. He also reported that gasoline was measured by the litre and was more expensive than at home.

The second, third and fourth articles are also descriptive, in the picturesque language that Van could produce so well. The *second* described the scenery they passed, the flora, fauna, mountains and villages, their driving among and around goats and sheep blocking the path that was called a highway, and the constant surveillance by police/soldiers every hundred miles or so. The *third* article gave his impressions of Mexico City. He described its history and the interesting sites he visited such as the Zocalo, or the main square of the city. The description of the Cathedral reflected a deeply moving experience for the author, and he continued for one complete column in the newspaper—the windows, the altar, the candelabra of solid gold, the elaborately-carved choir loft, the pipe organ with its 3,500 pipes. "It is difficult to describe the Cathedral, for the mind is dazed with wonder at the interior—the beauty, the intricacy, the size and the richness are altogether too much for the average mind to grasp." He then described the National Palace and the incomparable murals of Diego Rivera, the National Museum (a fore-runner of the present Museum of History and Anthropology), and the National Theatre (Palace of Arts).

The *fourth* article describes hotels, restaurants and menus. Alas, those well-known "Mexican" foods such as chili and tamales were not to be found, while tortillas were on every menu. This became the occasion for his description of corn in ancient cultures and worship even more prevalent than in contemporary society. He also described his dinner of octopus when he had to close his eyes for each bite! On the nine-day trip he reported that the four spent a total of less than \$100, "but we had a million dollars' worth of fun."

#### A SOUTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY STUDENT, 1935-1937

In the fall of 1935 Gordon, then 25 years of age, was enabled to return to his college studies, this time at Georgetown, Texas. Again, he was very active both in the academic matters and in extra-curricular affairs. He participated in the school choir, and after he had been on campus only a few months was elected President of the Junior Class. He was on the debate team, Sigma Tau Delta (national writers' fraternity), Pi Gamma Mu (honorary Social Science organization); "besides that, he is one of those fiends who play bridge when they should be studying."

## THE TEHUANTEPEC EXPEDITION

During the summer, 1936, between Gordon's junior and senior years he embarked on yet another adventure. He, who spoke Spanish fluently, was a coordinator of the Tehuantepec Expedition, an archaeological study trip of five students to ancient and little-studied Mayan ruins of southern Mexico and Guatemala. Dr. George Engerrand of the University of Texas and Dr. Frans Blom from Tulane, both specialists in Mayan studies, were in consultation with them. Encouragement also came from the National Geographic Society, the Carnegie Foundation, the Pan American Union, and the University of Pennsylvania. They would go, so Van reported when the ideas were being formulated, to an untouched mound and do excavating along the Gulf of Tehuantepec, in the state of Oaxaca. They would also work at the Indian village of San Juan in the state of Vera Cruz. They would copy hieroglyphics and pass the information to the archaeological department of Tulane University. "The expedition plans to study the inhabitants of this region and to make a search for certain rare tropical vegetation. We also will make a trip to the state of Chiapas, and will probably cross through Guatemala."

"One of the primary objects of the expedition," Gordon continued, "is to visit a group of Mayan ruins that are absolutely untouched, lying in the heart of the jungle, for archaeological research. The members of the expedition have already done a large amount of work toward mastering the Mayan hieroglyphics and other technical phases of archaeological research, and the problems to be overcome in living in the dense, tropical jungle are being worked out." They planned to raise money to finance their trip through their own efforts, and upon returning they would repay loans from published articles. Van reported: "I am the originator of the idea and the co-director of the expedition." In this position he had charge of publicity, finances and photography on the trip. The director was to have been Theophil Leonhard, a student from Germany who had previous experience in the fields concerned. Alas, as a German citizen he had passport problems and could not make the trip.

No aspect of advanced planning seemed to have been overlooked. They would live on fruits of the tropics, bananas and cabbage palms. They took all types of precautions against poisonous plants, vampire bats, poisonous snakes, and ticks, chiggers, mosquitos, rodidores (biting flies), beetles, leeches and "a thousand other insects whose delight is to make mankind miserable." The people to be encountered were native Mayan Indians, speaking little or no Spanish, having suspicions

of white men, and as Van reported, "shoot bows and arrows accurately!" His concluding summary was a type of charge to the group: "With lots of confidence and some good revolvers we shall sally forth to conquer the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, as did Cortez in days of yore!"

The expedition embarked on a fruit line steamer from New Orleans on June 16, 1936. When they finally were on their way the group consisted of five people: three students and one non-student couple. Three days after leaving the Mississippi delta they docked at Coatzacoalcas where they planned to make their way inland by train and by foot or horseback to the heart of the tropics. Van kept a detailed diary part of the time, telling where they went, whom he met, what he ate, and how much the hotels were (\$1 or \$2 per night). His calm spirit was finally shaken on the third day, however, on the slow train to the interior when he wrote: "This is the damndest railroad in the world. Started at 5 a.m. and made 160 km. by 2 o'clock. Stopped to pay off the section hands every five minutes." On another day he reported: "Train loaded to the ceiling with lower class Mexicans and Indians. They have no idea of sanitation, and the coaches offer no comforts whatsoever. . . ." "Food still a little hard to take;" pineapple became his staple and favorite food. They crossed from the state of Vera Cruz into Oaxaca at the small town of Jesus Carranza. Van reported about the people, the towns, the cocoanuts, bananas, pineapples, many types of flowers, Indian worship shrines, and rumors of Mayan ruins which no local people had ever visited, nor had anyone excavated any of them. "We are trying to obtain horses for a trip to San Martin tomorrow. . . . This is a lovely country with a good climate and everything grows abundantly. Farms on every hill."

The diary was discontinued when the actual digging began, so we do not have as complete a record as we might wish. Early the next semester, however, Van gave a report on his trip to Pi Gamma Mu, the honorary social science society of which he was a member. He showed photographs of Mayan ruins which he had taken and had pieces of pottery to illustrate his presentation. He concluded that the trip was not as successful as they had first hoped because their equipment as well as their information proved not completely adequate. They felt fortunate, however, in that they had encountered no health problems.

#### UNIVERSITY GRADUATION, 1937

Gordon's senior year at Southwestern opened with the usual activity, both academic and social. As a senior he was introduced to newcomers with the interesting description: "Tall, ungainly, smoking a

pipe, he will be seen about the campus, in the library, and around argument sessions practically at any time this year. . . . He makes friends easily, has a nice smile, a warm hand-shake, is a square-shooter and is destined to do right well for himself." Almost immediately he was elected President of the Student Body, and President of the American Student Union, a successor to the Progressive Democratic Club of which he had also been President. During the year his classmates elected him permanent President of the Class of '37. He was also chosen "most valuable student" of the University and served on the Faculty-Student Relations Committee.

He was a member of the Philosophy Club, and on one occasion participated in a debate with the Neo-Scholastic Club at nearby St. Edwards University. The topic was: "Does Neo-Scholasticism provide an adequate philosophy of life for today?" Van was one of the debaters on the negative side, representing his own University. Unfortunately, the outcome of the debate is not recorded! At a local church he gave his own philosophy of life in a lecture entitled "*Quo Vadis*: or where do we go from here?" The gist of the lecture was summarized in the local newspaper. Each person present should give thought to the direction in which his life was moving. "Quit drifting," said Mr. Van Sickle, "and plot a purposeful course for your life."

Evidently he took his own advice, for toward the end of his senior year evaluations continued to be written about this outstanding student. The minutes of one meeting reported: "All present recognized that the intelligent, energetic, and courageous leadership of Van Sickle has been an essential factor in the year's success." Another reported: "The same applies to Van Sickle in his capacity as President of the Student Association. The University has been fortunate in having a President who is always on the job, who can represent the student body and the school fittingly on any occasion, and who has the independence to meet even a difficult situation squarely and courageously." The Student Newspaper summarized the same attitude: "The American Student Union is an organization of forward-looking students working for the principles of liberty, democracy, and equality of opportunity, and in opposition to selfish, exploitative, disintegrating and destructive powers hostile to democracy." These words sum up the character and ideals of Gordon Van Sickle. Many of us hold these principles theoretically, but Van Sickle lives them. When he leaves next month, it will be with the appreciation and hearty good will of all." As though these activities were not enough, he was instructor in the English Department during part of his senior year.

As his graduation drew near, Gordon, the Student Body President,



wrote an article for the student newspaper. It was entitled "A Senior Looks at Southwestern." He reflected on his attitudes toward college as he began his Freshman year—success, girls, good jobs, get to know 'big shots'. Several paragraphs later he began to elaborate his own philosophy of education. "Personally, as I look back on my freshman days I cannot recognize that person that purported to be I. It is almost painful to recall my naivete, my ignorance of even the simplest values in life, my oblivion to many things that are now my daily mental and emotional fare. In exchange for that ignorance I have gained many things that four years and all the money in the world would not tempt me to part with. I have gained that value of values—the ability to recognize values and the desire to choose those that measure up to the highest ethical standard I know. That's what I call education.

"I could not leave this University without paying tribute to those who taught me here—my admiration for the character of the faculty here is of the highest, I never expect to meet again any group of people of like number whose idealism and personal character I could more intensely wish to emulate. In scholarship, I shall stand in awe of some of my instructors always—I never hope to equal them. The element I shall always treasure as my dearest heritage from this University is that challenging, virile, forward-looking combination of Christian idealism, intelligent progressiveness, and fearless action, as exemplified by the outstanding members of our faculty and administration. I know full well how little I know and how far short I am of my own ideals, but I thank God that I have had opportunity here to receive instruction from persons so able to guide my thinking forward and upward and who also have been a source of inspiration that I have so sorely needed. I have every reason to believe that these values are shared by my fellow graduates and are as profoundly appreciated. After all, college is a pretty good place, and Southwestern University need never bow to a superior—for nothing is superior to scholarship, integrity, and active Godliness."

#### MARRIAGE AND SUMMER EMPLOYMENT

Gordon graduated on June 8, 1937 with a major in philosophy. The next step in his life was reported in the Austin newspaper: "Student to end bachelorship after he gets his bachelor's degree." Indeed, that same evening after his graduation he married Iva Loretta Henley who was to share his life for almost forty years. Bishop John M. Moore performed the wedding ceremony, after he had also delivered the commencement address to the graduates. Bishop Moore was to be a leader in the union of the three branches of Methodism two years later.

Loretta was the step-daughter of the Reverend and Mrs. S. N. Allen, a retired minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. She had attended the Academy (high school) at Lon Morris, and two years of college there. She reports however, that since she was one year younger than Gordon he may have known her name, but paid no attention to her at that time. In 1932 the Allen family retired to Beeville, the Van Sickles' hometown, when Loretta had completed three years of her college work. She met Gordon again on her various trips to Beeville to visit her parents during her last year of college. She graduated from Southwestern University in 1933 with a major in History and Political Science. At that time, in the midst of the depression, teaching positions for beginners were almost non-existent. Although she was prepared to teach in high school, she finally began her teaching in the elementary school of Pawnee, Texas, 30 miles northwest of Beeville. She continued there until her marriage four years later.

By the time that Gordon completed his college training, he had accepted the position of Assistant Minister of the First Methodist Church in Corpus Christi for the summer. He entered enthusiastically into all phases of the work of the large urban church. On one occasion, soon after his arrival, he was speaker at the newly-organized Committee for Peace and Progress. He warned that merely to follow an "ism" was no automatic panacea. He cited examples of national socialism or communism which began with good intentions, but which became repressive instead. "Social and economic problems facing the American people today," he said, "cannot be solved by the people's crying 'Americanism' but through a better understanding of what democracy is and how it may best function."

The senior minister was ill much of the summer, so Gordon had many more responsibilities than he had expected. Early in September, he preached his last sermon in Corpus Christi and amid great enthusiasm of the congregation, the Van Sickles began their trip to New Haven, Connecticut. There Gordon would enter the Yale Divinity School later that month. The week after they left a parishioner wrote to Gordon's father: "He is a splendid leader of young people and did them a lot of good while here. Is a splendid preacher, too, and I heard so many such nice things said about him and his sweet little wife. . . . I believe he has a good future in front of him."

#### YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL, 1937-1940

The three years the Van Sickles were at Yale were especially trying. The effects of the depression were still being felt; there was a minimum of money and almost no jobs were to be found. Loretta had

hoped to continue teaching but was forced instead to work in a department store. They located an apartment on the third floor of a mortuary where they had free board and room while Van was the night manager. He often drove the hearse for funerals, sometimes as far away as White Plains, New York, assisted with counseling families, and even conducted the services in the absence of a local minister. Van received \$1.00 for each of these services. Loretta was often receptionist in the mortuary office during funerals, for which she also received \$1.00 per funeral. Financial concerns plagued them during their whole stay in New Haven. Loretta remembers how when they went shopping for food, the one who carried the groceries spent money for the street car fare, while the other walked to save a few cents! On one occasion a Yale official arranged for Gordon to drive his car and his wife to Arkansas. Gordon made more money on that one assignment than several weeks in the funeral home would have provided.

In spite of these problems, however, they continued their work in the local church on behalf of youth. Loretta taught a Church School class and Van was leader of a Boy Scout troop. For one year Van was minister of a church near New Haven where the program was totally endowed. He was to appear each Sunday only. This was hardly the type of church experience he had anticipated. On another occasion he was being considered as assistant in a church in Danbury, Connecticut. They went to the tea arranged for introducing them to the congregation. It was very soon evident that this was a church for the management personnel of the city, and the leaders intended to keep it that way. Furthermore, Gordon was informed that in their level of society everyone would wear hats. Actually the especially fancy hats, made of beaver, were manufactured in Danbury! Gordon decided quickly that this was not the church in which he should serve and took his name out of consideration almost before he had been offered the position. The leaders of the congregation were astonished, for rather than evaluating a potential student minister, they had themselves been evaluated.

Gordon studied the usual courses while in Yale, becoming proficient in several fields. The most significant influences on his future career, however, came with his work in Church History with Roland Bainton and Kenneth Scott Latourette. While he appreciated the precise scholarship of the former, he adopted the methodology and the comprehensive world-wide vision of the latter. Rather than confine his research to specific limited fields of research, as Bainton did, he chose to draw out various over-arching emphases of a 300 year period of history in one lecture, for example. This method made his

presentations extremely interesting, but presupposed much previous information on the part of the student, or more usually, it resulted in the students' trusting Van's generalizations to be accurate where the students had not done the vast amount of reading this method presupposed. His preference for a text in the basic Church History course was, therefore, that of Latourette rather than one with a more methodological approach such as the standard Williston Walker survey.

Gordon took to Yale a concern for the culture of the Spanish-speaking world, but he soon expanded his vision to include the worldwide mission emphasis of Latourette. Van later visited widely in the mission field not only in Latin America but in the Far East as well where Latourette had lived and which was his special interest. Van's comprehensive approach and vision continued throughout his whole teaching career. He was always as much at home discussing religious implications of the recent raids of the Irish Republican Army, or the latest offensive in the Viet Nam War, as he was of Luther, Charlemagne, Constantine or Leo the Great. He read widely all his life, and students often remarked that information from *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Christian Century* and many other periodicals, as well as the morning newspaper, was used as illustrative material within 24 hours after it came to his mailbox.

Despite the problems at Yale during the depression, Gordon graduated with the degree Bachelor of Divinity in 1940. In his class were others now in the field of education and known to some readers of this journal: Robert Paul Ramsey, William Ragsdale Cannon, William Waldo Beach, and Robert Earl Cushman. There were 53 graduates, of which seven were women—this phenomenon of women seminarians in our day is not really so new after all! Gordon was ordained in 1940 in the Southwest Texas Conference where he held continuous membership for 35 years.

#### GRADUATE SCHOOL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, 1940-1945.

Upon completing seminary training, they moved to the University of Texas where Loretta began teaching elementary school at Manor, and Van began a graduate program in Latin-American Studies. This particular graduate department was a wise choice for its library boasted of one of the finest collections of Latin American materials in the country, especially for historical studies. The almost unlimited resources included books, pamphlets, periodicals and documents printed in the Latin American countries, as well as elsewhere. Evidently Van made good progress in his studies for at the end of his second year, June 1942, he was elected to membership on the South-

western Committee on Latin-American Culture. This was comprised of interested scholars from ten midwestern and southwestern states who held annual meetings. His work was further recognized when he received a letter dated July 27, 1942, from the Tariff Commission in Washington, D. C. It stated, in part, that they wanted him to consider coming to the national capital "to work . . . on a survey for the Tariff Commission of the effects of the war on the countries of Latin America." The appointment was to be for two years, but he declined the invitation and remained in Texas.

In October 1942, the University decided to use his talents when Gordon was appointed Coordinator of Inter-American Student Activities, under the Institute of Latin American Studies of the University. In this position he was registrar, scholastic dean, dean of student life of the Latin American students and was the liaison between them and the University administration. This was a time-consuming position. At the time the University of Texas had 114 students from a dozen or more Latin-American countries. In one of his reports Gordon gave us an insight as to why this was true. The University awarded up to five full-tuition scholarships to *each* Latin-American country. This program was the second largest of any University in the country dealing specifically with students from these Spanish-speaking countries. At the time even the student newspaper was carrying some of its articles in Spanish.

One of the programs which was organized by the coordinator was a Conference on the "Future of the Americas," held for two days in February, 1943. Speakers from many backgrounds were there—politics, history, government, culture. This office also coordinated many projects in which student speakers or other cultural exchange programs were requested for University functions, for churches, for civic groups, and the like. His work was recognized and appreciated as the student newspaper gave him special praise in its issue of April 14, 1943: "Gordon Van Sickle, coordinator of Inter-American student activities, gives advice to Spanish-speaking students on subjects of housing, selective service, and passport problems. He makes a semi-annual report to the Institute of Latin-American Studies and keeps in touch with international student agencies. Frequently he is host to visiting Latin-American dignitaries."

After one year, however, Gordon felt he must resign his position in May 1943. He did this so that he could return to full-time studies, and because he had been granted a University Fellowship (\$600) which stipulated that he devote his time to his class work. In connection with his research he was appointed Instructor in History for the

summer session, 1943. The appointment was continued during the next year under the auspices of the Institute of Latin-American Studies. During this same period of time he was one of the organizers of the Latin American Institute in Mexico City—closely related to the University of Texas. For the spring semester and the summer term, 1944, he was “loaned” to Tulane University to teach Latin American and European History in the absence of the Chairman of the Department. Because this was only a temporary situation, Loretta continued her teaching position near Austin and went to New Orleans only for the summer. The next academic year (1944-45) Gordon was again Instructor in History at Texas, emphasizing especially Latin American history and culture. The salary each year was \$2,000.

During these five years, 1940-1945, Gordon was not only a graduate student and Instructor at the University, but he was a Methodist minister. He was appointed to two churches: Manor and Pflugerville, a few miles east and a few miles north of Austin, respectively. These were the war years and there were difficulties in raising Apportionments and Askings for the Conference. His ingenuity was caught in the Conference report: “Gordon Van Sickle, pastor at Manor, decided to give a calf. -He fattened the calf out and it brought at Austin stockyard auction \$47.”

Another less fortunate experience during the same years is reported by the editor of a newspaper in Kyle, fifteen miles south of Austin. The date is not included. “At about 11 o’clock Sunday morning a big fine looking stranger knocked at the editor’s door and introduced himself as H. G. Van Sickle, Methodist pastor at Manor, and said his car had got into trouble down the road and asked if we could give him aid, which was readily done—took him down the road to where his car had quit him, brought him and the tire back to a Kyle garage, where it was fixed, then took him back to his car. He wanted to pay, which was refused, but when he had gone, money was found on the seat sufficient to pay and then some. He and wife were enroute to Beeville to spend Christmas with relatives. Hope they had a good time, but suggest he get a spare for the next trip. May God bless him in his work.” It was during this year 1945 that their first daughter, Iras Loretta, now Mrs. Iras Crymble of Carbondale, Colorado, was born. Incidentally, they borrowed the name for their daughter from Shakespeare. Iras was one of the attendants to Cleopatra in “Anthony and Cleopatra.”

Although he was basically opposed to the war and the increasing military influence, Van volunteered for the Chaplaincy in the Navy in 1945, and left one month after his first daughter was born. “Good-

ness knows, there is no one less accommodated to military life and theory than myself, but at least I felt I was rendering a service which needed to be rendered and which I could not render in any other way." His training was completed at Williamsburg, Virginia, and because he finished the top student in his class, he was allowed some choice of his assignment. He chose to go to Guam where preparations were being made for the imminent invasion of Japan. For this assignment he was attached to a unit of the Marines, and the group began their trip westward. While they were enroute the atomic bombs were dropped and Japan surrendered, hence the invasion plans were cancelled. Van's Marine unit was in Hawaii at the time where he remained as a Chaplain at Pearl Harbor for several months. He had made arrangements for Loretta and Iras to come to Hawaii with him, but in 1946 there was no further need for the extra Chaplains. Van was released from the Navy and he returned to the University of Texas where he taught one more academic year (1946-47). He returned also to his two former churches of Manor and Pflugerville, and served Paige in addition; the latter was 20 miles east of Austin.

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER, 1947-1950

In the fall of 1947 Gordon became Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Denver. As soon as the war was over the University student body was augmented by many returning veterans taking advantage of the educational benefits of the "G. I. Bill." From a student body of under 5,000, it grew to about 12,000 by 1947 and continued at that high level for several years. Not only was the University forced to build new buildings, but they moved in several army barracks as "temporary" quarters for many classes, for dormitories, an army mess hall became the cafeteria, and a field house was acquired from an Army base being dismantled. Many temporary instructors and adjunct personnel were added in all departments. Gordon's invitation to come to Denver was part of this expansion.

Because of his studies and teaching at the University of Texas, Van was charged with planning the specialized courses in Latin American History. For three years he taught courses in History, Foreign Policy, and cultural developments "South of the Border." His popularity was immediately established because of his wide knowledge of his field. Even returning veterans who had been out of school for several years found in him a teacher who spoke on their level, for he too was a veteran and had some experiences similar to their own. Raymond Carey, professor of history at the University of Denver, once said that Van was "the best history teacher in the land."

The Van Sickles lived in "Buchtel Village," a group of temporary barracks along Buchtel Boulevard near Colorado Boulevard. These have long since been replaced by more substantial apartments which are still occupied by University of Denver student families. At that time, however, the Van Sickles lived almost in army style and among returned servicemen and their families. Within the first year Van was a member of the governing council of the student-faculty housing unit. In January 1948, he began inter-denominational religious services among the students who lived there. With the cooperation of others, he continued these as long as he was teaching at the University. In 1948 the second Van Sickle daughter, Janet Adrienne (now Mrs. Janet Kalinski of Boulder, Colorado), was born.

During the period of his teaching at the University, the Van Sickles purchased their vacation home in Central City, Colorado. One of his D. U. students knew of their interest in mountain property and happened to locate the house. The Van Sickles looked at the home which overlooks the opera house, negotiated the loan and contract all in one day! Over the years they have collected many pieces of antique furniture, duplicated the old wallpaper of the 1890s, and decorated the home with linen, dishes and other items of the same period—and so the house remains to this day. Even while they lived in Texas they spent much of each summer in Central City renovating and decorating.

By 1950 a large number of the veterans had completed their University program, and the extra faculty gradually found positions elsewhere. The Van Sickles returned to Austin, Texas, where Van continued research for his thesis on the Second Count of Revilla-Gigedo in Latin America. Before he joined the Navy in 1945 his topic had been approved and much of the research was done. Alas, in the interval the Chairman, Dr. Charles Wilson Hackett, decided the topic was large enough for two theses, and he counseled another student to take the same topic. When Van returned in 1950 he found not only that his topic was being completed by another student, but there was a new Chairman of the Department as Dr. Hackett had died. Gordon plunged into his research nevertheless, hoping to be able to modify his previous work for a slightly different purpose. In the process he spent one month in the National Library archives in Mexico City. Dr. Carlos E. Castaneda, the new chairman, was a Roman Catholic and did not support the thesis because Van was rather critical of the Roman Church's role in the exploitation of Latin America. Soon Dr. Castaneda died and for over a year no new chairman was appointed until finally the choice fell to Dr. Lewis Hanke in 1952. Alas, Van



had by that time started his teaching duties at Iliff. In a sense, the work of a decade resulted in no finished product, although Van's knowledge of Latin American developments was used many times in later lectures, courses, and one published article. During the years 1950-52 while Van was involved in his research, Loretta continued teaching in the elementary school which was included in the old Baker Junior High School in Austin.

#### THE ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, 1952-1975

In June 1952, while Van was digging a basement in his Central City home, he had a visitor. It was Dr. William H. Bernhardt, acting President of The Iliff School of Theology since the death two months before of President Edward R. Bartlett. Bernhardt told Gordon that the faculty wanted him to teach Church History courses to relieve Martin Rist of some courses, and to expand the offerings. Van said that because his plans were already definite at least for one year, and since Loretta was under contract to return to her teaching in Texas for the coming year as well, he could not accept. Dr. Bernhardt called again within a few days, bringing a more persuasive argument. This time Van decided to accept the offer. They purchased a home in a new area not yet incorporated into Littleton. The home was still under construction, however, and was not expected to be completed until the fall. For several weeks after Van began teaching at Iliff in September 1952, they lived in Central City and they were barely moved and settled in their new home in Littleton by the Christmas break. One of Van's first civic responsibilities in his new home was as a member of the community organization that negotiated the annexation of the Crestview section to the City of Littleton.

Loretta began to teach in the Littleton schools, which are a part of the Arapahoe County School District 6. Although her original plan was to work at the high school level, she later reflected that once she became involved with education of younger children, she never desired to teach in secondary schools. For 24 years in Littleton she devoted her efforts to this age children as follows: 1952-53, first grade in West Elementary School; 1953-56, first grade in South Elementary School; 1956-60, Elementary Coordinator; 1960-76, Principal of Walt Whitman Elementary School, from which she retired in 1976.

During Van's 23 years at Iliff he was in demand regularly to speak at churches, conferences, retreats and various civic functions. He often filed his programs for these speaking engagements, so these activities can be documented very easily. Included in his files were commendations from many organizations, attesting each time to his

ability as an interesting speaker, and his lively discussions. Much of his time was spent with various adult groups in many parts of the State. On one occasion, however, he participated as a guest of the students of Grant Junior High School in South Denver where their topic was "Friendship Among Other Nations of the Americas." He was as much at home in this situation as in any other.

At Iliff Van regularly taught courses such as the general survey of Church History, which were usually large classes. He taught, in addition, such more specialized courses such as Modern Church History, Modern Roman Catholicism, Histories of Missions especially in the Far East and in Latin America, and History of the various Eastern Orthodox Churches. Periodically he offered, also, his course on Comparative World Religions.

#### VAN SICKLE AS AN AUTHOR OF HISTORICAL STUDIES

All his published materials appeared while he was teaching at Iliff. One major article from his vast knowledge of Latin American Church and political developments was "The Background of Protestant Suppression in Colombia," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XI (Fall 1954). He began by reminding the readers that most of us know more about Africa or Burma than about most Latin American countries. Despite our lack of knowledge, however, between 1952 and 1954, 43 Protestant churches in Colombia were burned or dynamited, 116 Protestant schools were closed, and 53 Protestants murdered. He then summarized Colombian history and political unrest to explain the problem.

Colombia had a new constitution in 1886, but until 1930 the conservative/pro-Roman Catholic/pro-Nazi/anti-Communist/anti-American party was in power. From 1930 to 1946 the liberal/pro-American/anti-Nazi party ruled, and they introduced rapid modernizing principles which Van summarized in detail. For example, they promoted liberty, free speech, development of education, labor organizations, government control of business to benefit all people, and social security. Because of a split in the majority liberal party, the conservatives returned to power in 1946 and repealed the liberal developments as rapidly as possible. They developed "Yanquiphobia," destroyed democracy, and by 1950 established a dictatorship based on a coalition between the Roman Catholic Church and anti-Communist forces. A leading liberal politician was assassinated, as were several conservative leaders.

A part of the repression resulted in growing hatred of all things Protestant (or "atheist"). There was to be no proselytizing outside Protestant church buildings, and Protestant education was to be

limited to those already Protestant. All avenues of expanding the influence of the missionaries were frustrated. It would be only a matter of time, actually only a few months, before bombings or killings related to these "atheists" would be perpetrated.

This thorough article exemplifies very well Van's concern that church history of any region be thoroughly grounded in the culture and history of the area. Indeed, neither the church in Columbia, nor any where else exists in a vacuum, but rather is integrally related to political developments and social realities. Van predicted that at some time in the future the dictatorship of Pinilla Rojas would be replaced. At that time will Protestant individuals and groups, as well as American governmental policy, respond with a thorough knowledge of the real facts there? Or will we only remember the past regime which is solidly anti-Communist—while it is also anti-human rights, anti-democratic and dictatorial at the same time?

In the Spring Quarter, 1961, Van was awarded a grant by the American Association of Theological Schools (AATS) which allowed him to visit 13 nations in Central and South America. He published his report as "My Impression of our Mission in Spanish America," *The Iliff Reporter*, July 31, 1961. He visited all sites of Methodist mission work: primary and high schools, the only Methodist medical mission, the only Methodist hospital (La Paz, Bolivia), two Methodist seminaries and two union seminaries with which Methodists cooperate, social service centers, agricultural missions, two denominational presses and two others with which Methodists cooperate. His knowledge of the language allowed him to go where he wished rather than have a VIP guided tour which most "official" Methodist visitors had to be content with. His main points were three: *First*, "In every area our work can honestly be appraised as being, in every field, 'too little, too late, too often!' . . . In proportion to the task which awaits us in Latin America, we have been grossly negligent." *Second*, we have never "demonstrated that we had a clear conception of our task in Latin America. . . . Some of our largest and most successful schools cater only to the upper classes in countries with the most advanced education. . . while untold millions can neither read nor write. . . We publish a vast amount of literature . . . [but] the pay of the ministers, as for instance in Mexico, is so low that they cannot buy books themselves. . . laymen are less well-read. . . . Over one-third of our students in the excellent Union Seminary in Buenos Aires are women—there are almost no careers open for women in our Latin American Churches ('but they make good wives for our students'). . . ." He was critical that even when significant work is started financial changes at home cause drop

in support and the work is done inadequately, or disbanded. *Third*, "Our evangelical witness is alarmingly weak." After one hundred years there has been little change in the society. "We forget to remind them, and ourselves, that the gospel demands more of its adherents than merely giving up drunkenness, gambling, 'idol worship', and 'Sabbath-breaking'!" "In spite of nearly a century of effort. . . the results in most instances can be summed up as: 'Too little, too late, too often.' Too bad!"

Shortly after this article was published, Van received a letter from an official of the Methodist Mission in Peru who questioned his assessment of the situation. Van wrote a lengthy reply, analyzing and justifying his reasoning from his broad knowledge of the area. Finally, he concluded: "Neither statistics nor 'influence' indicate that we have done anything remarkable. Somehow I wish this were not so." Some time thereafter he composed an extremely thorough article which remains in typescript with his revisions and corrections in his own handwriting. It was entitled, "A Study in Missionary Motivation: The Failure of our Early Latin-American Experiment." His main argument was that our failure came because our motivation was not Christian concern for people in another part of the world, but rather anti-Catholicism at home.

In May 1963, he published a short article in *The Ilif Reporter* on "Current Trends in Christian History." He reacted against the idea that we are now in the "Post-Christian era," surveying hopeful signs and welcome new approaches. Church History studies now have more "relevance" to real concerns of the world in which we live; there is more of an irenic spirit, rather than denominational competition; the ecumenical movement has resulted in more Protestant-Roman Catholic understanding and even closer association with the Orthodox churches; the faith was not delivered once for all, but continues its development; there is fresh study on the Radical Reformation; the cultural milieu, or context in which the church lives is more thoroughly analyzed; coherence and continuity are emphasized more than the incoherence of a "unique" revelation. Furthermore, new studies of missions and relationships to non-Christian faiths have long been overdue and are now appearing. He included reference to many new printings of primary sources as well as many monographs of continuing value: "A wider view of the nature of the church has brought into being a new type of scholar."

One other article was found among Van's papers and was published posthumously. Written for presentation at a faculty colloquium in May 1965, "The Church' in History: An Historical Description of

the Evolutions of the Ideas and Forms to Which the Term 'Church' has been Applied" was published in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XXXII (Spring 1975). The word "church" had its roots in an Anglo-Saxon modification from the Greek *kyriakon* (i.e. "that which belongs to the Lord"), but the early church adopted instead *ecclesia* (i.e. "called out"), and the two terms are not interchangeable. The former was modified to mean many things—a fellowship of believers, a local building, a world-wide organization. No matter what the meaning of the different ages, he argues, the church has always been an interaction between "faith and act, creed and deed, belief and institution." Gradually the term was adapted to include hierarchies of bishops, sacraments, penance systems, and organizations for repression of dissenters. Usually, so he continued, the stated theories about the church were justifications for conditions already existing, rather than the source of the development itself. The theory of the Petrine origin of the Papacy, for example, developed in the 5th century only after the strength of the papacy was a well-established reality. A concluding statement indicates why the church must be *semper reformanda*: "Every view of the church must be, in the nature of things, 'a process' where in the very act of implementing the images by means of the institutions, we create new images and institutions."

In the many papers which Van saved and filed away, there are several lectures and articles which would surely have had an interested audience had they been published. These include technical material on various aspects of foreign policy and/or missions in Mexico and South America. In addition, there is correspondence with national publishers concerning Van's hopes to write both in the area of general church history, and in Latin American missions. Unfortunately, there were too many illnesses which intervened, and Van was never able to follow through on these plans. Furthermore, among the papers is his collection of his book reviews which appeared in both local and national periodicals, and which covered many different interests which were his.

There are several letters of the late 1960s in which Van challenged editors of two national periodicals, and authors of the articles as well. Against their pro-Administration, almost "McCarthyite" approach to the Viet Nam War, he marshalled an extremely thorough rebuttal, quoting history and contemporary authors, such as Norman Cousins, who had quite a different evaluation of our right to be involved. Nor was he sparing in his criticism of the policies of his fellow-Texan, President Lyndon B. Johnson. Still another publication received the brunt of his ire when in November, 1971, he cancelled his subscrip-

tions. He came directly to the point: "I have put up with the *Readers' Digest's* defense of the *status quo* in past years on the grounds that I could ignore your reactionary views on economics, politics, international relations, etc., but the deliberate ill-intention of the aforementioned attack on the World Council of Churches is the last straw."

Gordon made several trips to many parts of the world, always in the interest of the church and its mission. We have already noted his extended travel to the missions of Latin America on a grant from the American Association of Theological Schools (AATS) in 1961. Other travel included: Europe, 1957-58, 1965, 1968; Japan, 1968; Near East, Egypt through Turkey, 1969. He was active in many historical organizations such as the The American Historical Society, The American Society of Church History, the World Methodist Historical Society, Professors of Missions Association, and was a charter member of the American Society of Missiology.

#### VAN SICKLE AS A TEACHER

Gordon's first love was education, lecturing, and influencing students. He was always deeply involved with them in discussions, in visiting their churches, in being concerned about their personal problems or life decisions. Student response to his concern was unanimous, and much of this carried over into the classroom. At the time of Van's last illness and death, many present and former students expressed the thoughts and evaluations they had felt over the years. All of these comments are used with permission, as the students and associates of Gordon Van Sickle speak for themselves. Wendell Golden wrote from Africa: "You will be interested to know that as a result of Gordon's interest in missions in Africa, Clara and I decided on this area of the world in which to work." Jim Monroe, a former student assistant, reflected: "I always admired and appreciated the knack he had for bringing subjects alive and making them exciting." Another former student assistant, Bill Royle, expressed his appreciation. "I will always remember our talks in his office about any and all conceivable subjects. Nothing was above him or beneath him. Everything took on moral and spiritual implications; in a strange way nothing was sacred, but everything was holy." Ronald Hodges reported: "Every day was a fresh experience and every subject came alive as if the characters involved were reliving their careers before us. Never before or since have I been so honored to find an instructor who made education truly fun and exciting."

One month before Van's final illness, Allan Nesbitt wrote: "Your spirit of excitement and historical integrity influenced me consider-

ably. Your insight into history behind the history has been terribly valuable to me. I wanted you to know this before now, so forgive me for waiting. I regret that future Iliff students will not have the opportunity I had to sit under your guidance." After Van died Allen stated: "He was a great influence on me and still is."

Van had a significant role in teaching outside the school, and was sought by many local churches, Conferences, Mission Schools, Pastors' Schools and the like. More than 15 years ago J. Hubert Wubben, a former minister of the Litteton church where Van attended, captured the enthusiasm that many felt: "Your virile expression of your Christian convictions is quite a contrast to the tastelessness and juicelessness of so many theological professors and preachers. Most of us lack the courage to speak forthrightly what we believe, or else we don't believe that which brings contemporary society before the bar of critical analysis." Harold Parker, who is now a professor of history as well as a minister, stated: "His unbounding enthusiasm in the classroom, his tremendous sense of humor, his vast and comprehensive knowledge immediately won me to him. . . .He was able to cut through the Gordian knot of trivia and emerge with the real core of a topic. . . .He was one of the finest mentors a person could have." Harvey Potthoff, in the funeral meditation, put it in a larger context: "Gordon Van Sickle has given us many things, not the least of which is a vision with which to move into a new day with faith and courage." Allan Jackson summarized for all others: "The legacy of Gordon Van Sickle has been passed into the veins and the brain cells of hundreds of students who will be different, better, more effective in all of their lives and ministry because of his own devotion to truth, his effective communication, his capacity for conveying the flow of historical events and the marvelous drama of human life itself."

During Gordon's last year at Iliff his student assistant was Russ Rehm, who called him "a colorful character and a prince." Russ helped Van move books from his office in preparation for retirement, sorted and filed much other information, and finally, participated in some of the memorial services. When a tree was being planted in Van's memory at the Whitman Elementary School in Littleton, Russ spoke these words: "I became aware of the enormity of that long, distinguished career, as I helped him sort through mounds of accumulated materials in preparation for his retirement. Going through those papers with care and thoughtfulness, he relived his own history. It was difficult for him to discard what was so much a part of him, and yet, he seemed so complete, so happy, so content. . . . The hour of 8 a.m. is a difficult time to leap anywhere, but at that early hour leaping

back through history with Professor Van Sickle to relive exciting events was a great adventure. He knew how to make it come alive. . . . He introduced us to real people, saints and sinners, and many a bubble was punctured under the pin-prick of his wit. I loved to watch his mannerism—the well-timed pause, that tilted eyebrow, and those funny favorite expressions. . . . [The applause at the Convocation when Van's retirement was announced] seemed to be saying, 'Sir, you have taught us many things, but most of all, you have taught us how to live.'"

On September 26, 1975, Gordon Van Sickle would have reached his 65th birthday. He planned to retire on December 31 and arranged to take both Spring and Fall quarters as a sabbatical for research and extensive travel in the Far East. He had participated in the faculty's process of choosing his successor to begin with the opening of the new year in September. Alas, one week before the end of the Winter quarter, Van suffered a stroke and was in intensive care for one week until he died on March 17, 1975. He was survived by his wife, Loretta, his mother and his four brothers, his two daughters, Iras and Janet, and two grandchildren, Arlo and Megan Crymble.



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