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Article Summary: Lieutenant John J Pershing was appointed as the new military instructor at the University of Nebraska in 1891. Just five years out of West Point, he spent those years as a second lieutenant in the Sixth Cavalry in New Mexico, South Dakota and at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska. At the University from 1891 to 1895, he found the experience valuable, but he had a profound influence on the cadets as well.

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Photographs / Images: General John J Pershing; Pershing as Commandant at the University, 1892; Pershing and the Cadet Battalion, 1895; Chancellor James H Canfield, 1892;

JOHN J. PERSHING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA, 1891-1895

BY DONALD SMYTHE, S. J.

A LINCOLN, Nebraska, newspaper informed its readers in the spring of 1891 that John J. Pershing was a likely choice for the new military instructor at the University of Nebraska. Lieutenant Pershing, said the newspaper, "is well known in this city as an officer of much energy and promise. He has formed many acquaintances during his vacation visits with his parents in Lincoln, and should the War Department decide to send him here there is no doubt that the military department would be in the hands of an exceedingly popular and efficient officer."¹

The War Department did so decide. Pershing had for some time desired the appointment. Thirty-one years old in 1891, he was just five years out of West Point, and had

¹ Unidentified clipping, n.d., n.p., but attached to another clipping dated June 22, [1891?], giving about the same statement, in John J. Pershing Papers (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), Box 281. The Pershing Papers and their box numbers will hereinafter be cited thus: JJP, 281.

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spent those years as a second lieutenant in the Sixth Cavalry in New Mexico, South Dakota, and at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska. On visits to Lincoln, where he met University professors and state officials, he became convinced that service there would afford better opportunity for intellectual development and, in general, a better life than service at some remote and isolated frontier post. Besides, his family had moved to Lincoln and service there would permit him to live near them.² He first applied for the detail as military instructor at the University in 1888, but was rejected.³

By 1891, however, things had changed. In 1890 James Pershing had taken informal charge of John C. Allen's campaign for Secretary of State in Nebraska. Allen, successful, owed a political debt to young Pershing. In May, 1891, James Pershing wrote Allen that his brother, John, was "very anxious" for the assignment at the University of Nebraska. Could Allen use his influence as Secretary of State to get the University Board of Regents and the Nebraska Governor to petition the Secretary of War on John's behalf?

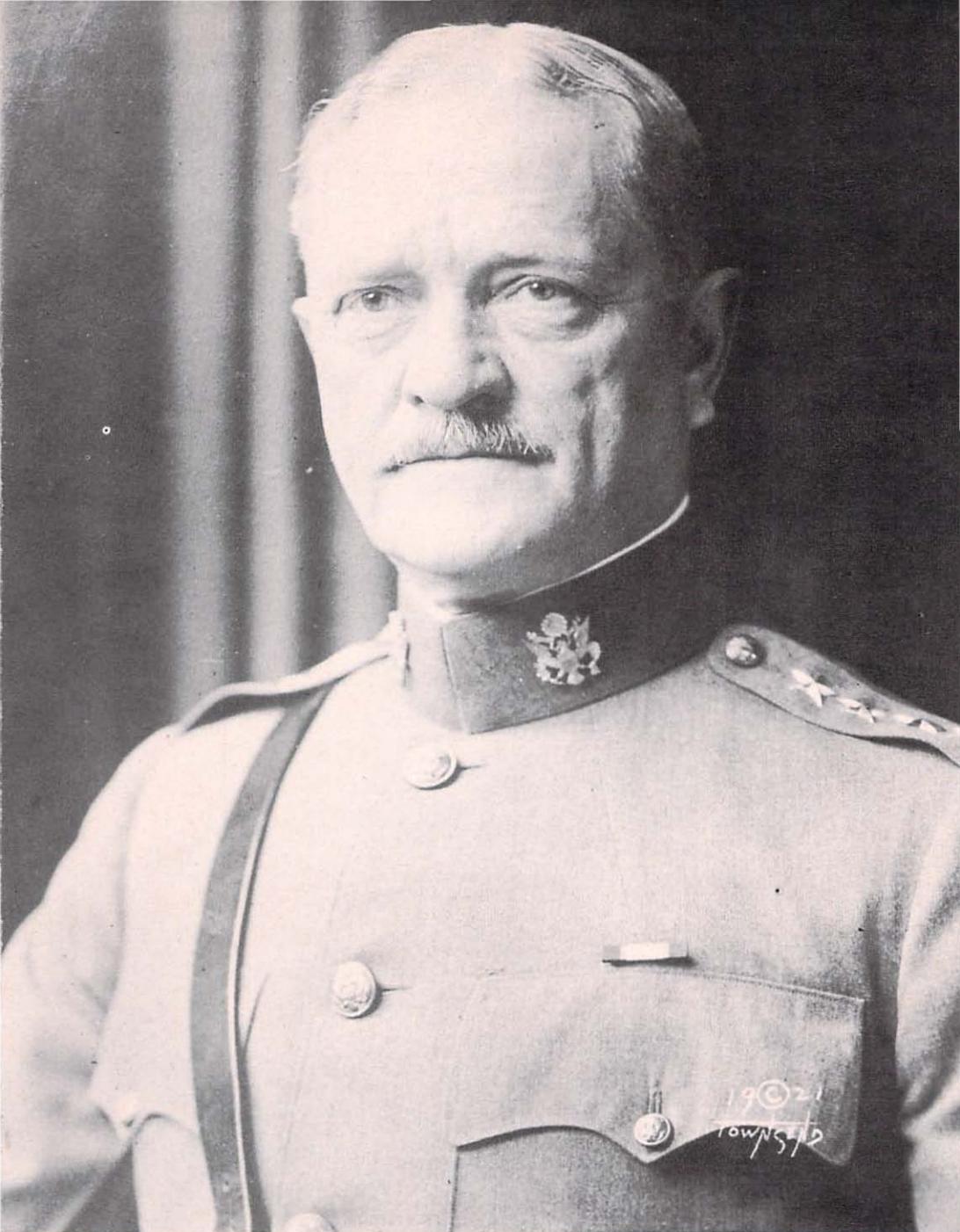
Allen wrote to United States Senator Charles F. Manderson, then Chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs, who, in turn, took the matter up with the Secretary of War, Stephen A. Elkins.⁴ On August 11, 1891, the War Department issued the necessary order, appointing John Pershing to the University of Nebraska for the coming school year. His official title was "Professor of Military Science and Tactics; . . . Commandant University Battalion; Teacher in Fencing."

Pershing had his work cut out for him. The University of Nebraska students were somewhat older than their

² Pershing, "Autobiography," June, 1936, ch. vi, p. 1, JJP, 380. The Pershing "Autobiography" and its pages will hereinafter be cited thus: PA, p. 1. References to it are always to chapter six of the June, 1936 version unless otherwise noted.

³ Secretary of the University of Nebraska to Pershing, June 27, 1888, JJP, 315.

⁴ George MacAdam, "The Life of General Pershing," *The World's Work*, XXXVII (February, 1919), 461.



General John J. Pershing



Pershing as Commandant at the University, 1892.
(From the **Sombrero**)



Pershing and the Cadet Battalion, 1895.



Chancellor James H. Canfield, 1892.
(From the **Sombrero**)

counterparts in the East and had absolutely no tradition of military training or discipline.⁵ By the testimony of the University Chancellor, "he found a few men, the interest in the battalion weak, the discipline next to nothing, and the instincts of the faculty and the precedent of the University against the corps."⁶

Pershing had an ally in the Chancellor, James H. Canfield.⁷ A warm, genial man of much personal magnetism, with a gift for bringing out the best in people around him, Canfield took an interest in Pershing and considerably influenced his life. He served as Pershing's mentor and helped him adjust from life at a frontier post to life in a university town. "He did regard Pershing, in a way, as 'one of his students,'" said the Chancellor's daughter, "and did give him a great deal of good advice about the way to manage his life, which I think the rather stiff West Pointer needed."⁸

Canfield, who had attended a military school in his youth, was personally convinced of the value of military training as an educational discipline. He believed (and told Pershing so) that such training developed a sense of loyalty and responsibility in students, as well as mental discipline and physical fitness. He left no doubt that, whatever might have been the policy in the past, the Military Instructor could count on the full support of the Chancellor. Thus encouraged, Pershing began the new school year deter-

⁵ An historian of the Military Department states that the first Commandant of Cadets at the University "provoked a downright mutiny by an 'arbitrary and unreasonable' insistence upon the wearing of uniforms at drill!" *Semi-Centennial Anniversary Book, The University of Nebraska, 1896-1919* (Lincoln, 1919), p. 53.

⁶ James H. Canfield to Hon. Frank L. Stetson, January 25, 1895 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.), 13987/C AGO 1895. National Archives is hereinafter cited thus: NA.

⁷ There is a short historical sketch of Canfield in the *Semi-Centennial Anniversary Book*, pp. 126-129. Canfield was Chancellor of the University of Nebraska from 1891-1895, then President of Ohio State University, and later Librarian of Columbia University.

⁸ PA, p. 1; Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Henry Castor, July 17, 1953. All letters from Mrs. Fisher to Mr. Castor in this article are in the latter's possession at Corde Madera, Calif. I wish to thank him for graciously permitting me to consult them.

mined to insist on a high grade of efficiency in the Corps right from the start.⁹

When the University of Nebraska cadets saw their new military instructor for the first time, they saw a tall, lean, young officer, clad immaculately in the dark blue blouse and the light blue trousers of the cavalry. His mustache was well clipped (he had grown this while in New Mexico); his shoulders were as square as his jaw. His clothes were spotless, his collar was exactly the prescribed one-quarter inch above the coat collar, and his shoes brightly shined. The brass buttons on his uniform, the buckle, and all the metal trimmings glistened in the sunlight. The new lieutenant looked formidable.¹⁰

The cadets soon learned that the new commandant meant business. At the first inspection he walked briskly up and down the line inspecting every man's shoes, uniform, gloves, and rifle. Not a knot in a shoe string or a tarnished brass button escaped his attention. To Cadet George L. Sheldon (who later became Governor of Nebraska) he snapped: "Cut out that farm walk!"¹¹

Punishments were swift; so were rewards. There were no favorites. If West Pointers used any more elbow grease, brass polish, and tar heel than Pershing demanded on black belts and leather cartridge boxes, the Nebraska cadets wondered what else they had time for during their West Point

⁹ PA, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *The Sombrero* for 1893-94 (University of Nebraska Yearbook), p. 45; *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917; Harry R. Follmer, *Footprints on the Sands of Time* (9 vols. in 12; n.p., 1950?-1953), Vol. VII, Part II, near front of book (pages are unnumbered).

¹¹ Follmer, *op. cit.*, IX, 137 and 139. Maj. Gen. Charles D. Herron, Chief of Staff, 78th Division, A.E.F., told the author that the first thing Pershing did when a man reported to him was to look him up and down from head to toe for neatness and appearance—and this no matter how hot the battle or how the war was going. Personal interview, June 25, 1960.

career. They got to know what was meant when a commandant was referred to as a "strict disciplinarian."¹²

One day, for example, the cadets were at target practice, shooting at a masked battery in an orchard. They were firing by volleys. The commands in those days were: Load! Ready! Aim! Fire!

Pershing, standing behind the cadets, barked out the first three commands: "Load!" "Ready!" "Aim!" Then, touching a cadet lightly with his foot, he whispered so that only he could hear: "Fire your piece."

"Rrr-ip," went the cadet's old 45-70 Springfield. "RRR-IP," went all the other cadets' rifles up and down the whole length of the firing line.

Then the fun began. Pershing stormed up to a cadet, jabbed his jaw into the latter's face, and inquired with exquisite sarcasm:

"Did you hear the command 'Fire!'?"

"No, sir."

"Then why did you fire?"

"I heard some one else fire, sir."

"Do you *always* do what you hear other people do?"

A pause. A gulp. Consternation. "No, sir."

The point was made. Thereafter, no University of Nebraska cadet fired his piece without first hearing, clearly and distinctly, the command, "Fire!"¹³

¹² *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917. Another source states that Pershing's discipline was so strict that the cadets jokingly referred to him as "The Fear that Walks by Noonday." This may or may not be true. *The Sombrero* for 1893-94, p. 224-231, printed a story by that name, but it had nothing to do with Pershing or the Military Department. The authors of the story, awarded first prize that year, were Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield (Fisher). *History of the Military Department, University of Nebraska, 1876-1941* (Lincoln, 1942), p. 22.

¹³ George MacAdam, "The Life of General Pershing," *The World's Work*, XXXVII (March, 1919), 542.

One might think that Nebraska farm boys would not take kindly to such tactics and to the new discipline imposed by Pershing. Such, indeed, was true with many. But the strange thing was, not only did Pershing impose iron discipline on the cadet battalion and make them work in a way they never imagined, but he had a way of making them like it, see a value in it, and actually take pride in it. It was amazing, but there was no getting around it. Pershing electrified the cadets!

"We all tried to walk like Pershing, talk like Pershing and look like Pershing," a cadet recalled. "His personality and strength of character dominated us . . . as I have never known in the case of any individual before or since, in or out of the Army. We loved him devotedly and yet I am sure the awe in which I stood of him during all those years was shared by every cadet."¹⁴ "Every inch of him was a soldier," testified another. "In all my life I have never seen a man with such poise, dignity and personality. Whether in uniform or not, he attracted attention wherever he went, but he was always affable and interesting to talk with and popular with students and professors."¹⁵ A third remarked: "By his splendid example he won the admiration of every red-blooded student in the school. He did not require of others what he did not require of himself. . . . Every student, man and woman, admired his soldierly bearing."¹⁶

The cadets liked their new commandant because he was strict but scrupulously fair. He did not incline to snap judgments, but when he made decisions, he made them quickly and they stuck. He was credited (perhaps incorrectly) with great mental capacities and an almost photographic memory; it was said he needed only a glance at a printed page to learn its entire contents. A story was told of how, at the beginning of the school year, Pershing would line up a company and have the First Sergeant read the roll; as the men answered, Pershing mentally connected

¹⁴ William Hayward, in *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917.

¹⁵ Erwin R. Davenport to author, June 14, 1960.

¹⁶ F. D. Eager, in Follmer, *op. cit.*, Vol. VII, Part II, near front (no pagination).

name and face, remembering perfectly, so that thereafter, during the first drill, he was able to call down a cadet by name.¹⁷

Faculty members too thought highly of Pershing. Dr. Fred Morrow Fling of the History Department remarked: "He had a fine presence, a genial and unpretentious manner and one gained the impression that he was a man of great physical reserve coupled with unusual driving power. His speech was incisive; he was quick in action."¹⁸ Jack Best, the University trainer, noticed that, despite great dignity, Pershing had a way of "getting next" to the new students, and added: "He was the finest man I ever worked with. It is true that he was mighty strict with his work, but the results he got were so good that everybody he worked with loved him for it. . . . I just worshipped that man and everybody around the University felt the same about him."¹⁹

Pershing made a number of changes in the Military Department at the University. At his suggestion, the Board of Regents increased the number of years of compulsory military training from two to three. He reorganized the entire corps, patterning it after the battalion at West Point, so that corporals were chosen from sophomores; sergeants, from juniors, and lieutenants and captains, from seniors. Following the West Point system, Pershing turned over to the cadet officers many details of training and discipline. Company commanders, for example, held inspection every Friday; Pershing himself inspected only on the last Friday of each month.²⁰

Classroom instruction consisted of lectures in tactics and recitations in infantry, artillery, and armory firing, guard regulations, elementary field engineering, and related military topics. Pershing added at least one extra

¹⁷ Charles A. Eliot, "The Early Days of the Pershing Rifles," *The Pershing Rifleman*, IV (May, 1935), 6.

¹⁸ John R. Johnson, *Representative Nebraskans* (Lincoln, 1954), p. 148.

¹⁹ *Joplin (Missouri) Globe*, February 24, 1918.

²⁰ *History of Military Department*, p. 19; Pershing Report to the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska, June 12, 1895, p. 2, JJP, 315. Cited hereinafter as Pershing Report.

course that was not required and established a lyceum for cadet officers, similar to those which existed in the Regular Army. It met once a month to hear a paper on a military topic or a lecture by an Army officer, preferably one who had actually taken part in the campaign he was describing.²¹

A stranger visiting the Military Department under Pershing was struck by its neatness and preciseness. Arms were kept locked in the armory, numbered and carefully arranged. The storeroom was neat and in order. All cadets used official forms in their correspondence. Department records were extremely complete. These covered delinquencies, demerits, drills, rosters, attendance, grades, target records, morning reports, etc.—all very carefully and correctly kept. Individual cards for each cadet bore his complete military record.²²

When Pershing took over at the University, the Military Department had 125 rifles; when he left it had 275, with 125 more expected to arrive shortly. When he came, the department had two old muzzle-loading field pieces; when he left there were four of these and two modern breech-loading guns besides. In Pershing's second year he set up a shooting range (in the bowling alley!) for winter practice; in warmer weather Pershing had the cadets out on a target range near the penitentiary.²³

An important change made by Pershing was the cadet uniform. The old one was ridiculous; even Pershing had to laugh when he first saw cadets in it: a brass-buttoned sack for a blouse and white ducks for trousers. "They were made under contract from measure by a concern which made tents and awnings," a cadet recalled, "and the goods must have been cut out with a circular saw."²⁴ Pershing's new uniforms, used at the start of his second year, were

²¹ Report of Maj. E. G. Fechet to Inspector General of the Army, May 23, 1895, pp. 5-7, JJP, 315. Cited hereinafter as Fechet Report.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3; Pershing Report, p. 1.

²⁴ *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917.

patterned, as was so much of what he did at the University of Nebraska, after the West Point model: the braided jacket, the striped trousers, the dark blue cloth. It was neat, fairly comfortable (for a uniform), and of excellent quality. Cadets could take a certain pride in it. The only difficulty was that it cost \$14.50 and each cadet had to pay for it himself.²⁵

For some this proved a hardship. One cadet, being appointed an officer in senior year, left a note in Pershing's room, declining. Pershing sent for him and inquired why. The cadet explained that he was pressed for money to get through school. He could not afford an officer's uniform and would be embarrassed to appear on parade without one. Pershing told him to accept the appointment: "Some way will be found to pay for it." It was; Pershing secretly paid the cost himself.²⁶

All observers agree that where Pershing shone brilliantly at the University of Nebraska was in his handling of the cadet battalion. "He had a really wonderful success," said an eyewitness, "in transposing the West Point atmosphere briefly into those hours when the battalion was drilling or parading."²⁷ Even one who did not take well at all to military training had to admit, "He could take a body of cornfed yokels and with only three hours of drill a week turn them into fancy cadets, almost indistinguishable from West Pointers."²⁸

Just how well Pershing succeeded in making "fancy cadets" may be gathered from the report of Major E. G. Fechet, sent by the War Department to inspect the Military Department at the University of Nebraska. The marching, reported Fechet, both quick and double time, was "very steady" and movements "finely executed." Arms and accoutrements were "in excellent condition."²⁹

²⁵ Pershing Report, p. 2; Fechet Report, pp. 3-4.

²⁶ PA, 1934 or 1935, ch. vi, p. 3A, JJP, 377.

²⁷ Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Henry Castor, July 30, 1953.

²⁸ Alvin Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress: An Autobiography* (New York, 1952), p. 78.

²⁹ Fechet Report, p. 1.

[The Cadets] showed a degree of proficiency that I believe can be equalled by but few military organizations where a Battalion of four companies is considered. I doubt if there can be found a better drilled Battalion outside of West Point, either Regulars or Militia. I know these are high words of praise, but I feel confident that any officer of experience, after seeing the Battalion manoeuvre, would confirm my opinion. The high degree of proficiency attained is due entirely to the energy, ability and tact to organize and command, of Lieut. Pershing. Previous to his arrival, but little, I understand, had been accomplished. No special interest had been manifested in the Military Department, either in the college or among the residents of Lincoln. Now it is just the reverse. All seem to try to see who can show the most interest in the University Battalion.³⁰

Such success did not come automatically. It meant much care and work; sometimes, despite the best-laid plans, there was failure. Once, for example, a grand review was staged on the campus with the Governor of Nebraska and other dignitaries present. Accompanying the cadet battalion was a fifteen or twenty-piece band, indirectly under Pershing's command, but directly under a civilian professional musician named D. F. Easterday, popularly called "The Professor." This latter had to take what talent came to him and talent, it seemed, did not beat a path to his door. The musicians learned only a few pieces. These they played loudly and vigorously on the simple "um-pah" parts, but when more difficult passages came along, they suddenly found their mouth pieces were clogged. They had to remove and blow them out just when the difficult notes were due. The result was generally "The Professor" playing a solo to cover the rest of the band.

Pershing was concerned about the band's ability and especially its ability to play at double time, but "The Professor" reassured him.

The review began. The cadet battalion swung smartly across the field and made its movements with utmost precision. Its advance in line was without flaw.

The second time around, however, was double time. When the band went into its alleged double time, catas-

³⁰ Report on the Annual Competitive Drill at the University of Nebraska by Maj. E. G. Fechet, June 3, 1895, p. 3, JJP, 315.

trophe struck. Not even the most charitable could call their noise music and not even a thousand-legged worm could keep in step to their cadence. The battalion (which could do very well by itself without music) immediately disintegrated as an organized unit. No one was in step; it was a complete rout.

Pershing watched helplessly. Then, with his jaw stuck out, he double-timed across the parade grounds. "Stop that band!" he cried. "Stop that band!! Stop that awful band!!!"³¹

After the event, a Pershing-Easterday conference took place. No one heard exactly what was said, but everyone noticed that the band never made a shambles of the battalion again. And the school yearbook for 1894 mentioned that the band, which had been notorious for its marching and defied the efforts of all previous commandants, had been "tamed" by Pershing.³²

The quality of the battalion's marching was the result of the dress parades which Pershing held periodically on the campus. Usually a fair-sized crowd gathered to watch these. Lincoln was a small town, with little excitement or spectacle; watching the battalion maneuver satisfied the yearning of many students, professors, and townspeople to see a parade.

Once they saw something more than this; they saw Pershing in a very ridiculous situation. It came about in this way. Because Pershing did so much civilian work on the campus, it was his custom to wear civilian clothes at all times, except when on duty. One day he made a mistake. Changing hurriedly into his uniform for a dress parade, he forgot to change one important item—his derby hat.

He stepped out across the parade ground in his usual snappy West Point walk, utterly oblivious of how incongruous he looked. The crowd saw it immediately, as did

³¹ *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917.

³² *Ibid.*; *The Sombrero* for 1893-94, p. 42.

the battalion. The cadet adjutant (wondering wildly what was going to happen), came to the salute, and said, "Sir, the parade is formed." Pershing's hand whipped up to return the salute, but instead of the visor of his cap, he encountered the brim of his derby. Without betraying any surprise, he brought his hand down smartly, just as if he had given the regular salute, marched crisply back to his tent, re-emerged with the proper headdress, marched back again to where the battalion stood waiting, gave the salute, and barked out, "Pass in review!"—all without a sign of embarrassment and, still more amazing, without the battalion or the spectators bursting out into gales of laughter. "I always thought that was characteristic of him," commented an eyewitness, "that he had so established the military tradition of decorum that a perfectly unbridled middle-western group of spectators did not laugh, did not comment on it, and did not laugh afterwards."³³

A high point in Pershing's work with the cadet battalion occurred in the spring of 1892. Some cadets read an announcement about a national drill competition to be held at Omaha. They approached Pershing: Could they enter? Enthusiasm was high in the battalion; they felt they would make a good showing, might even win. Would Pershing approve, and would he consent to coach them?³⁴

Pershing consented. From the one hundred cadets who volunteered, he selected forty-five and put them through an intensive period of training. They drilled in the early morning before class, they drilled in the afternoon after class, and they drilled in the evening after supper. They polished their arms to a brilliant luster and they made their uniforms immaculate. As cadet captain of this

³³ Fisher to Castor, July 30, 1953. During World War I, when Dorothy Canfield Fisher was in Paris, she was asked to write something about Pershing. When she told Pershing she was thinking of writing about the derby hat, he was startled, but said, "Well, all right. But you let me see it before you send it to the magazine." After reading the draft (very gravely), he gave her permission to publish it, adding, "You know, you are the first person who ever spoke to me about that." *Ibid.*

³⁴ PA, p. 3.

special company, Pershing selected George L. Sheldon, later Governor of Nebraska.³⁵

The contest opened on June 13, 1892, with a parade through the crowd-lined streets of Omaha. Veteran drill companies were there—the National Fencibles of Washington, the Sealy Rifles of Galveston, the McCarthy Light Guards of Little Rock (as well as the green University of Nebraska cadets from Lincoln.)³⁶ That evening Pershing assembled his cadets and gave them a ruthless inspection. He was in a severe mood. He was not at all satisfied with their performance in the parade that day. Frankly, he thought they were “terrible.” They had made a poor impression compared with the other drill teams. They had disgraced the occasion, disgraced themselves, disgraced him, and disgraced the University of Nebraska. They had absolutely no chance at all against veteran companies with such marching; they might just as well not have come!³⁷

The Nebraska cadets were crestfallen. They thought they had made a good showing; they had been rather pleased with themselves. But here was Pershing, whom they counted as their best friend, ready to disown them and obviously very much irritated and disgusted with them. Obediently and dejectedly, they went to work from then until bedtime: cleaning rifles, polishing buttons, blackening shoes. Such an impression did Pershing make on them about their appearance that, if one story can be believed, some actually blackened the *soles* of their shoes!

When the company assembled the next day, ready to march to the drill ground for the contest, Pershing again berated them in harsh language. It was a very chastened

³⁵ Charles G. Dawes to Harry Follmer, December 4, 1939, in Follmer, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, near end.

Sheldon said later of Pershing's work with this company: “It was here that I came to fully appreciate his proficiency, efficiency and tremendous determination. He instructed that company as only a master teacher could, and he drilled it to perfect precision.” Quoted in *ibid.*, IX, 139.

³⁶ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, June 13, 1892.

³⁷ Pershing was quoted later as saying, “They were too good. They were perfect and they knew it. I couldn't let them go into a competition feeling like that.” *History of Military Department*, p. 17.

and sober group that heard him out and began marching towards the parade ground as if to their doom. But before they reached there, Pershing had one final word to say. Unexpectedly halting the company, he marched to the front, turned around and, with all eyes on him, said simply and quietly, "I think you are going to win the first prize."³⁸

The effect was electric. It was like a bolt of lightning from heaven. The University of Nebraska cadets threw back their shoulders, puffed out their chests, and marched down the street as if they were out to conquer the world.

The Nebraska cadets swung through the prescribed maneuvers with a vengeance and showed a deftness rarely seen in new companies. The regulations allowed forty-five minutes to complete the exercises; such was the rapidity and sureness of Pershing's boys that they finished in just one-half that time. No other company could compare with them in the Maiden Division. They took the first prize of \$1,500 easily; it was not even close. Chancellor Canfield, the bulk of the Nebraska student body, and a large section of the Lincoln population scrambled over the guard rails out onto the field and, in a burst of civic pride, carried the cadets bodily off the parade grounds.³⁹

Perhaps no single event gave such impetus to the military program at the University of Nebraska as this first-place win at the National Competition at Omaha. The next school year saw a larger percentage of students registered for the program than ever before. More important, a picked group of cadets organized themselves as the "Varsity Rifles" and voluntarily continued their military training. By 1895 the "Varsity Rifles" had become the "Persh-

³⁸ Dawes to Follmer, in Follmer, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, near end.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, IX, 141; *The Sombrero* for 1893-94, p. 45; *History of Military Department*, pp. 17-18; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, June 19, 1892; PA, p. 3. The winning cadets showed their appreciation to Pershing in November, 1892 when, with the help of Chancellor Canfield, they enticed Pershing to his room in the armory and presented him with a gold-mounted cavalry sabre. Then they trooped off to MacFarland's Restaurant, where the Chancellor had an oyster supper waiting.

ing Rifles," the first of scores of military companies throughout the United States to bear that name.⁴⁰

Besides the military training already mentioned, Pershing also ran an annual summer encampment for the cadets. Attendance was voluntary and the students had to pay their own way; still, about eighty per cent of the enrollment attended them. Pershing taught the cadets problems of attack and defense, practical instruction in guard duty, castramentation, and minor tactics. He chased the cadets over hills and across fields, always with a definite objective in view, as they discovered later.⁴¹ "Pershing ran that camp just as though the enemy was just over the hill and no fooling about it," said a former cadet. "We had a couple of old cannons and they had to be dragged to the camp and set up ready for the attack of the enemy."⁴²

One night about 1:00 A.M., one of these cannons went off with a terrible bang. "Pershing sure did raise hell," the sentry remembered, "as he just could not stand for any infraction of discipline. He had every man on the carpet, but did not find the culprit or culprits. I guess he had to punish someone so he put me in the hoosegow for the duration of the camp."⁴³

When Chancellor Canfield had had his first conference with Pershing, besides speaking of military matters, the Chancellor had also suggested that Pershing study law. No telling, said Canfield, when such knowledge would serve an officer handily, whether on the frontier or elsewhere. Pershing had once been interested in law and had considered it as a career. Why not enroll in the University Law School and take a law degree on the side?⁴⁴

⁴⁰ PA, p. 4; L. H. Robbins [?], *Sec. pro. tem.* of Pershing Rifles, to Pershing, May 29, 1895, JJP, 160.

⁴¹ PA, 1934 or 1935, ch. vi, p. 2, JJP, 337; *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917.

⁴² Davenport to author, June 14, 1960.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ James H. Canfield to the Secretary of War, December 5, 1903 (NA), 464287/P AGO 1902, filed with 3849 A.C.P. 86.

Canfield may have had motives in making such a suggestion which were not apparent to young Pershing. "I think my father took his measure pretty early," said the Chancellor's daughter years later. "Anyhow he [Pershing] did have a reputation for—well, it wouldn't be called drinking nowadays when everybody does it, but of not being the most sober member of society." Canfield, she suggested, "knew that a full-blooded young man of that age . . . really wouldn't have enough to do to keep him out of mischief just with training the battalion which wasn't allowed too many hours out of the regular educational work." Hence the suggestion about law.⁴⁵

The University of Nebraska Law School was new. Established in August, 1891, it opened its doors in October as the only law school in the State. Pershing appears to have enrolled with the first classes and, if one source is to be believed, to have received some kind of advanced standing due to his prior reading of Blackstone and Kent.⁴⁶

He did well in his law studies. "He had a keen analytical mind," said Henry H. Wilson, one of the professors, "and was a diligent student of the law. No one intimately acquainted with the young lieutenant will doubt that he would have become an eminent lawyer had he devoted his life to the practice of that profession."⁴⁷ Charles E. Magoon, a lifelong friend, in whose law office Pershing spent many hours smoking cigars and helping Magoon prepare cases, remarked: "He has naturally a legal mind. By that I mean that he has natural attainment and inclination that way. I doubt if he ever would have made a good jury lawyer . . . But for grasp of legal principles, for power to

⁴⁵ Fisher to Castor, July 30, 1953. A student who attended Pershing's 8:00 A.M. mathematics class spoke of his "dissipated" look after having had "a bad night." Gen. Ernest D. Scott to author, August 12, 1960.

⁴⁶ MacAdam, *World's Work*, XXXVII, 543.

⁴⁷ Quoted without date in Follmer, *op. cit.*, IX, 146. The Dean of the Law School remarked: "He has rare and peculiar abilities for the legal profession, and would undoubtedly succeed as a practitioner far above the average, were he to devote his time exclusively to that calling." W. Henry Smith to the Secretary of War, August 6, 1895, JJP, 281.

discern the relation of one group of facts to another group, I believe, had he followed the law, he would have stood in the forerank of the profession."⁴⁸ On June 7, 1893, Pershing received his diploma as Bachelor of Laws.⁴⁹

Pershing's law degree did not necessarily indicate that he planned to resign from the Army and take up a legal career. Chancellor Canfield, in making the suggestion about law, simply presented it as an opportunity to better prepare Pershing for future Army work, whatever that might be. A reporter who later interviewed a number of men who were Pershing's familiars in Lincoln at this time, recounts that "not one of them ever heard him speak of the law as his future occupation. So far as they could judge by his conversation, he had then cast his lot definitely with the Army."⁵⁰

But Pershing himself, while he may not have broadcast the fact, was having secret thoughts. The Army was woefully small; it seemed to offer few advantages beyond routine promotion. He would not be a captain for fifteen years and would be only a major when the time came to retire. By Pershing's own admission, "because of the gloomy outlook it seemed best for me to plan to resign and enter the legal profession. My mind turned in that direction especially while in Lincoln. . . ."⁵¹ He approached another young lawyer, Charles G. Dawes, and confided his thoughts. The only thing he really knew anything about, said Pershing, was the business of Indian fighting, and that was in the doldrums. He inclined to law, but he had no bidders for his talent. What would Dawes think of taking him in as a law partner?

Dawes advised against it. "Better lawyers than either you or I can ever hope to be are starving in Nebraska," he warned. "I'd try the Army for a while yet. Your pay may

⁴⁸ MacAdam, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁹ Diploma in JJP, 419.

⁵⁰ MacAdam, *loc. cit.*

⁵¹ PA, p. 5.

be small, but it comes very regularly."⁵² Pershing took the advice, but it was almost fifteen years later, when he became a general officer in 1906, before he gave up all thought of law as a career.⁵³

During his term at the University of Nebraska, in addition to his duties as Military Commandant and his studies in the law school, Pershing also did some teaching. He could use extra money; he still had time on his hands. On his own, therefore, Pershing arranged to teach a mathematics class three hours a day (for \$650 a year extra). This was in a preparatory school which Chancellor Canfield had established to remedy what was often woeful preparation for college in the students who came to the University as freshmen. The students were mostly from small towns or farms; some had not been able to attend high school; others had attended high schools that were quite inadequate preparation for college. Many students had read hardly anything at all before they came to the University. (One, for example, confessed that the only book he had ever read was *Robinson Crusoe*, and he was convinced that most of it was lies.) On the other hand, what these students lacked in background, they were determined to make up for in zeal and hard work.⁵⁴

One of Pershing's students was a little girl just entering teen-age, a bundle of fun with bright brown eyes and lustrous brown curls. She was the Chancellor's daughter, just out of the eighth grade and sent to the preparatory school instead of the regular high school because the latter was too far away. In after life she became known to countless readers as the novelist, Dorothy Canfield Fisher,⁵⁵ and

⁵² Bascom N. Timmons, *Portrait of an American, Charles G. Dawes* (New York, 1953), p. 28.

⁵³ Pershing, quoted in Thomas M. Johnson, "Boys, We had Him Wrong," *The American Magazine*, CV (May, 1928), 84.

⁵⁴ Alvin Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79; Fisher to Castor, July 27 and 30, 1953; Pershing to Julius Penn, October 9, 1894, JJP, 282.

⁵⁵ It has been reported that she and Pershing were dancing partners at the University. Apart from her age, which makes it unlikely, there is her own word to the contrary. "All that talk about our being dancing partners etc. is moonshine. I never could imagine where that fantasy started." Fisher to Castor, July 17, 1953.

she has left a vivid picture of the teaching of John J. Pershing.

I remember it very well because it was the only time in my life—even in my years in France, where the teaching at that time was very old fashioned and by rote, that I ever encountered a teacher who taught a living subject like geometry as he would have taught a squad of raw recruits he was teaching to drill—that is, by telling them what to do and expecting them to do it. He was of the kind who said, "Lesson for tomorrow will be from page 32 to page 36. All problems must be solved before coming to class."

As I remember it, he never gave us any idea of what geometry was all about, and I now have the impression that he didn't know himself that there was anything more to geometry than what was on page 32 and following. I particularly remember that class because one girl in it, a little girl of about my age, was completely bewildered by geometry. She didn't understand it at all, nor was anything ever said in class to make her understand it. But she had the quick, facile memory of a youngster of that age. And she was also very much afraid of Pershing's harsh rebuke when somebody didn't know a lesson. So she ended by committing her lessons to memory—literally to memory. That is, if anybody had changed the lettering of a problem, of the different points of a triangle, for instance, she wouldn't have been able to do it. But by committing it to memory she was able to get through each day's recitation, putting it correctly on the board. And as I remember, she was passed at the end of the year without Pershing ever having detected the fact that she didn't understand a word of what she was saying.

And yet, the older men students who were working for an engineer's course got a great deal out of it. The point was, they had the motivation, and also the maturity of mind and experience, which took them out of the class of the bewildered little girl, and enabled them to need just what Pershing gave, a sort of supervision of self-education.⁵⁶

Besides Miss Canfield, another student destined to be well known in the literary world sat in Pershing's mathematics class—Alvin Johnson, later editor of the *New Republic* and the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. He had entered preparatory school late and had to push at first to catch up with the other students.

⁵⁶ Fisher to Castor, July 30, 1953. Pershing in his *My Experiences in the World War* (New York, 1931), I, 74, spoke of Miss Canfield as his "star pupil in mathematics." As she was only a little lass of thirteen or fourteen in a class of fully grown young men (some of them not so young), it is unlikely. She herself, while appreciative of Pershing's compliment, stated afterwards that it was simply not true and should be eliminated from any life of Pershing. *Ibid.*

"Most of my teachers were very considerate," said Johnson later, "and gave me more time than I needed to catch up. Not so Lieutenant John J. Pershing. I had been in his class one week when he ordered me to the board to work out a complicated problem in algebra. I asked to be excused on the ground that I had not had time to catch up with the class.

"'You have been here a week,' he said grimly. 'Next Monday, be caught up.'

"I was."⁵⁷

During his classes Johnson carefully studied the young lieutenant, whom the registrar later described as the toughest teacher in the school. He was "tall, perfectly built, handsome. All his movements, all play of expression, were rigidly controlled to a military pattern. His pedagogy was military. His questions were short, sharp orders, and he expected quick, succinct answers. Woe to the student who put a problem on the board in loose or slovenly fashion! Pershing's soul appeared to have been formed on the pattern of 'Present—arms! Right shoulder—arms! Fours right! Forward march!'"⁵⁸

Like Miss Canfield, Johnson admired Pershing—but as a soldier, not as a teacher. "Never in the whole year did he give us a glimpse of the Pythagorean enthusiasm for mathematics as an incomparable weapon for subjugating even the unknowable."⁵⁹

What Pershing did give Johnson, though not right away and not as part of the curriculum, was an amazing demonstration of memory. At the end of Johnson's first year, Pershing appointed him cadet corporal for the coming year. For some reason Johnson did not desire the appointment and induced Pershing to remove his name from the

⁵⁷ Alvin Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78. "Of all my teachers," said Johnson, "Lieutenant Pershing interested me most. I devoted myself more to studying him than to the progress of the class." *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

list. About half a century afterwards, the two ran into each other again at a party given by Bernard Baruch.

"I think I have met you before," said Pershing.

"Certainly," replied Johnson. "You have met hundreds of thousands, who all remember you, but you can't remember the hundreds of thousands."

"Was it in Nebraska, when I was Commandant of Cadets?"

Johnson was startled. "It was."

"And you were the cadet who refused to be a corporal. I never did understand your reasoning."⁶⁰

Johnson was amazed at his memory.

So too was another former University of Nebraska cadet, Erwin R. Davenport, who encountered Pershing by chance at a cigar counter in the Waldorf Astoria, after a separation of over forty years. When Davenport gave his name and introduced himself as a former member of the Pershing Rifles, Pershing put out his hand and said, "Davenport, I remember you; glad to see you." Davenport, by his own admission, thought the recognition was trumped up and that Pershing "was lying like a gentleman." But Pershing, after thinking a moment, asked what had become of Harry Oury, Phil Russell, and Bert Wheedon, all members of Davenport's class and fraternity. Davenport was flabbergasted. "It was the most astounding example of memory I had ever seen," he confessed. He went on to ask Pershing how he, with all the experiences he had had and all the people he had met, could remember these names.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80. Johnson, who met a good many famous men in his career and shook the hands of many of the great, felt that Pershing's handshake did not "spark" as did that, for example, of Al Smith, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, or Dwight Eisenhower. By "spark" he meant a hand which says "I am I, and you are you, and we are for each other." Other handshakes conveyed this; Pershing's never did. *Ibid.*, p. 379.

Pershing's answer was simple and matter of fact: "Oh, I don't know; they just come to me."⁶¹

Commandant of Cadets, student of law, teacher of geometry—Pershing worked at all three. It was a fair amount of work—enough at least, "to keep him out of mischief" (as Dorothy Canfield Fisher put it)⁶²—and some social life was necessary as balance. He was no recluse. He was out meeting people, making contacts, enjoying himself. A cigar each day at five o'clock in Charlie Magoon's law office was the perfect way to relax, making small talk and conversing about the law. Magoon later became Governor of Panama, and then Governor of Cuba; he did not forget Pershing, nor Pershing him.⁶³ Another contact (and good friend), George de Rue Meiklejohn, was later Assistant Secretary of War at a time when Pershing needed influence in the War Department.⁶⁴ Elmer Burkett was another important contact. Pershing met him in the University of Nebraska Law School; ten years later Burkett, then a United States Congressman, called on President Theodore Roosevelt, urging him to promote Pershing to Brigadier General.⁶⁵ Lorenzo Crouse, Governor of Nebraska, wrote good reports on Pershing as his Aide de Camp.⁶⁶ William Jennings Bryan knew Pershing only slightly, but was kind enough to let him and other aspiring law students use his law library in Lincoln.⁶⁷

The greatest friend Pershing made in Lincoln, however, was Charles G. Dawes, later Vice-President of the

⁶¹ Davenport to author, June 14, 1960. Pershing himself admitted that he had a "glorious memory" and claimed he got it from his mother. PA, July, 1936, ch. xiv, p. 8, JJP, 380.

⁶² Fisher to Castor, July 30, 1953.

⁶³ MacAdam, *World's Work*, XXXVII, 543.

⁶⁴ In 1898, when Pershing was seeking active service in the Spanish-American War.

⁶⁵ *Sioux City (Iowa) Journal*, January 7, 1907; *Washington (D.C.) Times*, December 21, 1906; unidentified press clipping, dated November 25, 1903; JJP, 381.

⁶⁶ Crouse praised him "as a most estimable gentleman and one worthy of any distinction or promotion." Crouse to Adjutant General of the Army, January 3, 1895 (NA), enclosure 3 of 13987/A AGO 1895.

⁶⁷ PA, p. 6.

United States. Their friendship was one of the closest each of them ever had with anybody, and it was lifelong. Many times they sat down together at Don Cameron's restaurant, where the pancakes were good and, more important, cheap. They both had to watch their pennies. Dawes remembered all his life the device Pershing had for making his old dress suit go a few extra years: when the tails on the suit became threadbare, Pershing took an old pair of pants to a tailor and had him cut out a new pair of tails from the material and stitch them on.⁶⁸

Near the end of his career at the University of Nebraska Pershing took serious thought of his future. Thirty-five years old, he was only a first lieutenant.⁶⁹ Having entered West Point at a later age than the average cadet, he was at the bottom of the seniority heap and had less than thirty years before he would have to retire by law at sixty-four. Promotion in the cavalry was slow. He could only hope to be a major, or, with unusual luck, a lieutenant colonel. A career in the Army seemed to lead nowhere. Indian wars were dormant; war with another country was hardly probable. Dawes had advised him to stay with the Army. Was there any way to speed up promotion?⁷⁰

Pershing thought so. After getting from Julius Penn a list of retirements and vacancies in the entire Army and studying it, Pershing decided to switch from line to staff. It meant foregoing the kind of active duty he liked, but it also meant a better chance of promotion. On January 19, 1895, he applied for appointment in the commissary department, where a vacancy existed with the rank of captain. On February 4, learning that the Secretary of War had decided against any more appointments there, he transferred

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Timmons, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23. The measure of Dawes' intimacy with Pershing may be gathered from the passing remark of Marcossou: "He [Dawes] was the only person I ever heard address Pershing as 'John.'" Isaac Marcossou, *Before I Forget: A Pilgrimage to the Past* (New York, 1959), p. 213.

⁶⁹ He had been promoted to first lieutenant on October 20, 1892, and transferred to the Tenth Cavalry, a Negro regiment.

⁷⁰ PA, p. 5; Avery D. Andrews, *My Friend and Classmate, John J. Pershing* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1939), p. 47.

his application to the quartermaster department.⁷¹ Supporting his application was a barrage of recommendations and testimonial letters, a veritable litany of praise for Pershing: "perfect bearing in every way" (Major E. G. Fechet), "superb officer" (General Wesley Merritt), "one of the best subaltern officers in the Army" (General A. McD. McCook), "equal to every duty" (General Eugene A. Carr), "remarkable zeal, energy and skill" (General Nelson A. Miles).⁷²

It was in vain. Superiors passed over Pershing and filled the vacancies in the quartermaster department with other appointees. He was disappointed but not discouraged. "I can find no fault with the selections as they are all good ones," he wrote to Avery D. Andrews. "But there are more to follow at intervals, and I hope to win eventually, if I remain in the Army."⁷³

In the spring of 1895 Pershing's term of service at the University drew to a close. With regret he read his farewell order to the cadet battalion at the last dress parade of the school year:

The commandant desires to say further that next to marching in command of the Cadets at West Point as the senior Cadet Captain, he never can experience greater pride than he has felt marching in command of the Corps of Cadets at the University of Nebraska. Having witnessed the organization grow in numbers from 90 in 1891 to 350 in 1895, and having seen it improve in appearance, soldierly bearing, gentlemanly conduct, and efficiency in the same ratio, it can but bring to him feelings of greatest satisfaction. It is hoped that the many lessons learned may not soon be forgotten, and that ties of friendship may long be unbroken.⁷⁴

Pershing's regret at leaving was equaled, probably exceeded, by James H. Canfield's. The Chancellor knew a good thing when he saw it, and he had seen Pershing's military department grow more rapidly than any other in

⁷¹ Pershing to Penn, *loc. cit.*; Pershing to Adjutant General of Army, January 19 and February 4, 1895 (NA), 13987/A and 13987/D AGO 1895.

⁷² Dated respectively January 21, 23, 25, 25, and 28, 1895 (NA), 13987/C (enclosures 3-6) and 13987/B AGO 1895.

⁷³ Letter of May, 1895, quoted in Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁷⁴ *History of Military Department*, p. 23.

the University and make a great impression on the people of the city and the state. Canfield's importunities had kept Pershing at the University one year longer than usual, but now the day of parting was dawning, and he quite frankly told the cadets, "You are to lose the services of one of the best instructors that the regular army has ever sent us, or has ever sent to any similar post in this country."⁷⁵

Chancellor Canfield also wrote a report on Pershing which any young officer would be glad to receive:

Lieutenant John J. Pershing, who is now Commandant of Cadets in this institution, reaches the end of his service here next June. He has been with us four years. I know much about the duties of his position and I know something about the officers of the army. I speak with both experience and observation therefore when I say without the slightest reserve that he is the most energetic, active, industrious, competent, and successful officer that I have ever known in a position of this kind. We have the second best corps in the United States according to the reports of United States inspectors; the first being the corps at West Point. Lieutenant Pershing has made this corps what it is today. . . . By his indomitable energy, by his engaging personality, by his unquestioned ability, and by his untiring industry, he has brought the battalion to its present position.

He is thorough in everything he undertakes, a gentleman by instinct and breeding, straight-forward, with an unusually bright mind, and peculiarly just and true in all his dealings.⁷⁶

The years at the University of Nebraska had been happy for Pershing. They were also formative and instructive. Nebraska educated Pershing quite as much as Pershing educated the students there. It broadened his horizons and brought him into contact with new people and new situations which he had never before had opportunity to encounter. Pershing, after all, was a country boy. He spent his first twenty-two years in a small town in Missouri, his next four in the confining, almost seminary-like routine of West Point, and his next five in isolated Army posts on the frontier. His only contacts had been with country people and Army people. The University of Nebraska assignment brought him in contact with a more

⁷⁵ Canfield to the Officers and Men of the Cadet Battalion, May 27, 1895, JJP, 315.

⁷⁶ Canfield to Stetson, *loc. cit.*

urban society, with a university faculty and a university atmosphere, with a liberal arts tradition, with a civilian populace. By his own admission he found the experience "valuable"; it was "one of the most . . . profitable" of his life. He later declared that it would be desirable for every Army officer to have some association, as he did, with a university, and this precisely because of its broadening influence. Even from a military standpoint, he felt, university life would teach, as in no other way, an understanding of the young men who would form the nation's citizenry in peace and her armies in war.⁷⁷

But if the University did a lot for Pershing, there was no doubt in his mind that he had done much for it in return. His military course taught the students precision, promptness, fitness, and a respect for authority. "In my opinion," Pershing told the Board of Regents in his final report to them, "the influence of the discipline required in the Military Department can be credited with the excellent state of affairs from a disciplinary point of view now existing in this University." His final report recommended increasing the term of service for cadets from three to four years and making compulsory for all males over fifteen the practical work of the military department (drill, fitness, etc.), if not the theoretical (classroom instruction). Should war come, he felt that any cadet who had had his military course could capably organize and command a company of men, if not a battalion.⁷⁸

How the University of Nebraska cadets generally felt about Pershing admits of little doubt. They were devoted to him utterly and entirely; he aroused in them an intense, personal enthusiasm. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who knew Pershing both then and later, doubted whether at any other period of his life he showed qualities which brought out in other people this enthusiastic, personal devotion. By the testimony of her own brother, a cadet under Pershing, this devotion existed throughout the battalion.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ PA, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁸ Pershing Report, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁹ Fisher to Castor, July 27, 1953.

When Pershing came to leave the University, the cadets wanted some kind of remembrance of him, some sort of badge or insignia to show they had been under him. Inspired by a brainstorm, a select committee approached Pershing and asked for a pair of his breeches.

Pershing was nonplused.

"What in the world do you want a pair of my breeches for?"

They explained that they wanted to cut them up into little bits of cloth, showing the blue of the cavalry and the yellow of the seam, and wear them as service ribbons.

Pershing was plainly touched. After a pause, he said, "I will give you the very best pair I own."⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Former Cadet William Howard, in *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 5, 1917.