



10-1-1985

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Recommended Citation

Kimball, Edward L. (1985) "Spencer W. Kimball at College," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 25 : Iss. 4 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol25/iss4/14>

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Spencer W. Kimball at College

Edward L. Kimball

Spencer W. Kimball returned home to Thatcher, Arizona, from his mission to the Central States on 31 December 1916, just in time for a New Year's Eve party with his friends. A month later, he went off to Tucson to attend the University of Arizona and signed up for English, German, American history, English history, economics, and military training. After the first day, he wrote in his journal, "The Profs made such a big bluff that I was almost frightened to death and tho't I would never get thru', consequently I was much discouraged." After three weeks, his fear had disappeared: "I feel quite encouraged in school, as my Eng. themes are accepted and my other lessons seem to be getting easier." Three days later: "Washington's birthday, a holiday. I am studying hard at home as the school library is closed." The next week: "Worked hard at my lessons all week, took exams in Economics, A – in one, 83% in the other."

His journal shows that he was not a drudge. He often records Church activities, parties, participation in the college glee club, and part-time work for an invalid at twenty-five cents an hour. "By this means I am supporting myself thru' college." He lived with his brother Gordon in the nearby town of Binghampton and rode to and from Tucson with Gordon.

"Spent a great deal of time [Friday, 30 March] on a thesis on the 'Great Revolution of 1688.' All evening [Saturday] and until 3 A.M. I wrote on the theme. All day Sunday I wrote on my history theme till 2:30, when we went in to town and marched with the 7000 paraders in an American day parade." (On 29 May, he recorded, "Rec'd Hist. theme. A., best in class, said Prof. Hubbard.")

Friday, 6 April:

Today War was declared against Germany. It is probable that I shall soon be forcibly enlisted in the army and killing my fellow beings. Horrors. This morning in assembly the Pres. of the school said that the U. of A., with all its appurtenances are offered for the use of the nation. We were counceled to get our school work up to date and if called shortly away from school we may get our credits anyway. Serious!!!

Edward L. Kimball is Ernest L. Wilkinson Professor of Law at Brigham Young University.

Sunday, 29 April:

Wm. Jennings Bryan [whose son was in the class] gave the Baccalaureate address when the 50 U. of A. Seniors received their degrees. Graduation was hastened one month because most of the boys went to the Presidio at Frisco to the training camp.

His own exams occupied the last week of May. He then returned to Thatcher for two weeks before going to Los Angeles to work in the freight yards for the summer, earning money for college. A month later, his father telegraphed him, "Come Monday night, better job waiting." He returned home and worked from mid-July to mid-August on the Gillespie ranch. "Started work mining 200 ft. below, digging for water." On 17 August he reported, "Worked hard in the well. We hand-drilled with a churn drill two holes 22 ft. 6 in. and 25 ft. deep, found no water. I read 'Richard Carvel,' 'The Crisis' by Churchill."

Thursday, 30 August: "After I finished my work [at home in Thatcher] I went to Pima to see Lawrence [best friend Lawrence Holladay]. In the jitney I met Miss Camilla Eyring and I accompanied her home." In the next ten days, he spent time with Camilla on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday, before taking the train to Utah on Monday, 10 September, to attend Brigham Young University. Their time together had been brief, but though his journal gives no hint of his feelings, the letters Spencer and Camilla exchanged after he left for BYU indicate the growing warmth of their relationship (see pages 85–90 in his biography).

Journal entry for Monday, 17 September:

Caught the 1:15 Orem train to Provo. Got off on Center St. and, seeing a large bldg next the hill and thinking it the University, I started out to walk there. When I neared the building a curious looking fellow called out hilariously, "Hello, old sport." I proceeded and saw numbers of old men and women playing croquet, so I decided it was the mental asylum. I got my directions and retraced my steps.

The student body was tiny because of the war. Spencer registered for English grammar and composition, mathematics, European history, public speaking, philosophical Mormonism, and physical training. But after exactly one week of classes, he received a letter from the draft board in Arizona directing him to report for a preinduction physical examination and then return to Arizona to join a contingent leaving the next week. He wrote Camilla:

I shall file no exemption claims and I'm positive I can pass the physical test.

I can't study tonight. I can only think. Pardon me for bothering you with my troubles but I tho't you might be glad to know. If I am

to leave soon I am not unwilling to go but of course it is hard to have one's plans so broken into that's all. . . .

I was the only member in the public speaking class so I get individual instruction. I can now breathe clear down to my toes, can roar like a lion or squeak like a mouse. I can gesticulate till you'd think I was hammering or pitching hay or etc. etc. There were two of us in Math. 4 in Hist., about 6 in Theology. . . .

I like all my Profs fine but _____ and I can't hardly stand him. Today he had a dirtier shirt than mine and wore the trousers and shoes he wore while milking the cow.

I wish I had a class under your uncle [Carl Eyring] for he is the swellest Prof in the whole faculty.

When he told President Brimhall, who was also his theology teacher, that he was leaving, the president put his arm around Spencer and said he was sorry to lose him as a student. The BYU Archives also contain a stiffly formal letter of withdrawal and President Brimhall's warm response:

Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah
Sept. 26, 1917.

To the Presidency and Faculty of the B.Y.U.

In order that you may know the cause of my absence from school and my abrupt discontinuance therefrom, I leave this note.

I have received an authoritative call to arms from the authorities of the United States. I have successfully passed the physical examination. I shall file no claims for exemption, and shall in a few days leave for my home in Arizona, from which place I shall leave for the training camps early in October.

I wish to express my appreciation for the kindness and consideration with which I have been treated while in your midst.

Yours, with gratitude,
Spencer W. Kimball

October 2, 1917

Spencer W. Kimball
c/o President Andrew Kimball
Thatcher, Arizona

Our beloved Student:

I found your letter on the tabel [sic] under date of September 26; and now having time to answer it, I wish to say that you have a flood of friends in the B.Y.U.

Your sudden call was something of a disappointment to us as we had hoped to have your valued services in the student body this year.

Had I not met you personally and felt the atmosphere with which you are surrounded, the closing paragraph of your letter would have been sufficient for me to know that you are an Israelite, and that you will be a valiant defender of the truth, physically, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. God bless you our dear friend, brother, student.

We enclose herewith your tuition, less the entrance fee, which holds your membership in the school.

With the assurance that the Lord will have you in mind wherever you go, and that whatever road you may take in the end you will be among the triumphant ones, we are

Very sincerely,

The Faculty of the Brigham Young University

By _____ President

This was the end of Spencer W. Kimball's college experience. By the time he was able to return to Arizona, the contingent he had been drafted for had already left. While waiting to leave, Spencer and Camilla decided to marry, despite the unsettling prospect of immediate separation. Before he had been home a month, the wedding ceremony took place on 16 November 1917. Though he never did serve in the Army, his responsibility to support a wife—and a child that arrived nine-and-a-half months later—kept him from returning to school.

At one time, about 1924, Spencer and Camilla considered his leaving his job as a bank teller and going back to school to become an accountant or teacher. They obtained from the university a report on his credits and thought about how they and their two children could live on savings and part-time work while Spencer finished his degree. But this possibility of further education disappeared when Spencer, at age twenty-nine, was called to serve as a counselor in the St. Joseph stake presidency. That took priority.

All his life, Spencer suffered from feelings of inadequacy, among them a sense of embarrassment that he had no college diploma. Though he lived in a time when only a few of his high school classmates completed college, he felt that he could and should have found a way. When he became a General Authority, he feared that people would think less of the Church because he, one of its leaders, was under-educated. He never bothered to modify the official biography that the Church sent out for publicity purposes, identifying him as having graduated from "Gila Academy (now Eastern Arizona College)," even though the Gila Academy at the time he attended offered only high-school-level work. For a man so meticulously honest to have allowed that characterization to stand suggests how embarrassing he found the fact that he had completed only one semester of college work.

Though Spencer W. Kimball had no degree, it would be absurd to think of him as uneducated. Formal courses with lectures and

examinations, leading to letter degrees, are only one way to education, and not necessarily the best way. Spencer was a great reader, with a taste for fact rather than fiction. He marked up his books vigorously, usually with a red pencil. His file cabinets bulge with dozens of feet of folders crammed with clippings and notes from magazines and books, reflecting goal-oriented reading.

In 1948, while he was recuperating in Long Beach, California, from a 1947 heart attack, he took a twenty-five-foot roll of shelf paper and made for himself a time line of the world's secular history, going to the history books to put in sequence the eras and great events from the ancient Near Eastern civilizations to the "Russian cold war." Then he ran a parallel time line of the prophets and kings from the scriptures and Church history down to that time, ending with the notation "172 stakes."

To the extent that Spencer W. Kimball thought of himself as uneducated, he was seriously mistaken. His sermons, writing, conversation, and conduct all demonstrated that he was a superbly self-educated man.