

Winning Speech of the Colonel W. T. Bondurant, Jr. Oratorical Contest

By Gibson Gunn, Grade 8

During my life I have always been aware of my Scottish heritage. I have known where my ancestors came from and that my name is a mix of many of the names of my forefathers. However, it hasn't been until recently that I have really taken an interest in the previous generations of the Gunn family. In the past few years I have begun reading about some of the men who came before me. One of those who most intrigued me was a man named George Gunn. George Gunn was my great-great grandfather. He crossed the Atlantic, leaving his life in Scotland behind, to see the world and explore new opportunities. In doing so, he showed boldness, initiative, and a strong sense of self-confidence. All of these three characteristics are qualities I have always tried to exhibit in dealing with whatever life throws my way.

When George Gunn came to America, he showed a boldness not found in many individuals of any era. He was born in 1846 and spent the early years of his life living on his father's farm, and it was farming that occupied him until he reached the age of twenty. Looking for some change and improvement, he then decided to take up the milling business. He followed that profession until 1872, when he bravely took upon himself a great journey and left his native shores for America.

Will Durant once said "The best immigrants cross the broadest oceans." Perhaps this is true. For it was immigrants, like George Gunn, who boldly forsook their lives in their home countries to come to America, and it was they who made this nation strong. I have often wondered what it must have been like to leave everything familiar behind and to travel to a land totally different from the one he knew. It must have required great tenacity of spirit to leave one's home and travel to a distant, unknown place where the future was not certain. He arrived in America and settled in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. There he began working the white lead business, in which he rose to the rank of vice-president in a Pittsburgh firm.

George Gunn also showed an initiative in his life that has been a guide to me in mine. The quality of having "initiative" is described in Webster's dictionary as "energy or aptitude displayed in the initiation of action." My great-great grandfather's recognition of an opportunity to improve his situation was what provided him with the energy to pursue his goal. Shortly after arriving in America he became very successful in the white lead business. His success in part was due to his aptitude for seizing opportunity and performing hard work.

George Gunn again displayed his initiative when after many years in America, he was seized with a desire to visit his homeland and revisit the scenes of his youth in Scotland. The trip lasted two months, and his only comment upon returning was that "not much had changed." Maybe this voyage was a vacation, or perhaps it was a nostalgic journey, but I believe he had to make the trip to satisfy himself that his original inclination to leave had been correct. He reaffirmed his original sense of initiative as having been correct. I hope I, too, will have the aptitude to see the true paths in my life, just as he did long ago.

Reflecting on the boldness and initiative George Gunn showed in performing the various deeds that made him successful is something that has helped me whenever I have needed that extra prod to just get up and go. I had always been thrilled and fascinated by the bagpipes, and when I heard them played up close for the first time at my grandfather's eightieth birthday party, I decided that I must learn to play them. Within a few months I began taking lessons. As I became more experienced with the bagpipes I really began to look upon my Scottish heritage with increased interest. The bagpipes are an extremely difficult instrument to play. It would have been easy for me to give up on many occasions but the connection felt to George Gunn, to his strong spirit and to my heritage all helped me persevere. In fact, as I practice, and as I hear the music issuing forth from this ancient instrument, I find myself reflecting back upon George Gunn and the qualities he exhibited as he forged a solid foundation for his descendents in America.

I believe George Gunn's most important characteristic was his self-confidence. He displayed the quality when he decided to leave his home in Scotland for America. For example, once he had become settled in America he joined the Caledonian society and he became president of this society from 1890-1891. He was also a devout Presbyterian, and he was always a noted teacher of Sabbath-school. Whenever I am having trouble overcoming a difficulty, and my confidence is wavering, I have looked back upon George Gunn and his life, and thought about how much confidence it took him to leave what was familiar and begin a new life. His life to me always has been and always will be inspiring.

My great-great grandfather displayed boldness, initiative, and self-confidence in his life, and in doing so he set a strong foundation for the Gunns in North America. Now I am here four generations later, after my family has gone through two great migrations, from Scotland to Pennsylvania, from Pennsylvania to Texas, and I cannot help but wonder what great movement I might make. For the Gunns are now settled on this continent, and in the words of Winston Churchill, "now is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."