The Thirty Year President

Walter Harrington Ryle was born on June 1, 1896, on a farm in Howard County, Missouri, near the village of Yates. His parents, Walter Ryle and Kate Stark Ryle, were descendants of pioneer families of Howard County, and both were to have major influences on their son's life. From his father, young Ryle learned to read, write, and do some math. From his mother he learned to lead a disciplined way of life and he acquired a system based on stern morality. From both he learned a reverence for all nature and all living things, whether plant or animal.

When young Ryle was six years old, he began attending the Ryle School, named after his grandfather and located just over the Randolph County line. The importance young Ryle's family placed on schooling was proved when his father bought his brother John's farm partly because it was near, what he felt, was a better school, the Ryle School. By this time young Ryle had two younger brothers, Ivan Stark and Claude Bradley, both of whom would also be ready for school. Walter Ryle completed the courses offered by the Ryle School in 1912; however, feeling inadequately prepared for college, he spent the year 1912-1913 reading and studying at home.

On September 8, 1913, the 17-year-old farm boy arrived in Kirksville to enroll at the Normal School. During the next three years Ryle was deeply influenced by three great men. To a degree difficult to understand today, President John R. Kirk dominated the school and Walter Ryle soon became one of the president's most loyal friends. It has been said that upon becoming president himself, Ryle consciously at times and perhaps unknowingly at other times, emulated John R. Kirk particularly in Ryle's relationships with the student body. As a student at Kirkville State Normal School, Ryle was greatly influenced by his favorite professor Eugene Morrow Violette. Another history professor who was highly admired by young Ryle was Joseph Lyman Kingsbury who taught ancient history.

Ryle had come to Kirksville intent on preparing himself for the law profession; however, due to the influence of men like Kirk, Violette and Kingsbury, and the atmosphere of the Normal School itself, by December of 1914 he seems to have resolved to study and teach history instead of practicing law. In August 1916, Walter Harrington Ryle III was one of 39 graduates of the First District Normal School to receive the 90-hour diploma which carried with it a lifetime certificate to teach in the public schools of Missouri. He had become deeply attached to the school and said often in later years that John R. Kirk's Kirkville Normal School was one of the better institutions of its kind in the United States.

After completing the Normal School course, Ryle was hired to serve as principal of Clifton Hill High School at a salary of $55 a month for a nine-month term. Fourteen months later, when the superintendent resigned in December of 1917 to enter the Army, the school board promptly named Ryle superintendent of the Clifton Hill schools. During the summers of 1917 and 1918 he worked on his 120-hour degree at Kirksville; however, he was inducted into the Army in August of 1918 after his second summer session. After being discharged, Ryle returned to Kirksville to finish his Bachelor of Science in Education degree. The Kirkville Normal School was renamed in May of 1919 to Northeast Missouri State Teachers College. Ryle received his B.S. in Education in August 1919.

In September of 1919 Ryle was selected principal of the Palmyra High School at a salary of $1,100 for nine months. In the fall of 1921 Ryle was appointed the principal of the Holden High School. Upon the resignation of the superintendent, Ryle was elected superintendent and remained until 1927. Except for the summer of 1924, Ryle spent each summer while he was superintendent of the Holden schools in graduate study at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, where he received his Master of Arts degree in...
the summer of 1927. In the spring of 1926, President Eugene Fair, who had succeeded John R. Kirk as head of the Northeast Missouri State Teachers College in 1924, offered Ryle a position on the college faculty beginning in the fall of 1928.

Once he had finished teaching in public schools and the road to college teaching had been entered, Walter Ryle decided to get married. On the evening of June 7, 1927, at the age of 31, he and Maurine Adell Lea were married at the home of her parents near Clifton Hill. Maurine Ryle was an invaluable helper to her husband in his chosen profession. Her appreciation for thorough human understanding helped balance her husband’s qualities.

He began his college teaching career in the fall of 1928 teaching American History. Determined to proceed with his plan to obtain his doctoral degree as quickly as possible, he requested and was granted a leave of absence for the 1929-1930 academic year. In 1930, with the Ph.D. degree in hand, he returned to the college as Professor of Social Science. He divided his time between teaching two classes in geography and one or two in history each quarter. He enjoyed teaching. It was said that “he was stimulating, thorough and energetic in the classroom.” He used the syllabus method of organization with its familiar list of sources for each problem outside the basic text. In the next six years Dr. Ryle came to exert considerable influence as an alert and energetic faculty member whose interest was unquestionably in administration and in the formulation of college policy. It was well-known that Dr. Ryle was warmly attached to President Fair and the President to his young faculty member, fresh from graduate school with a Ph.D., then all too rare on the Kirksville campus. Professor Ryle had been involved with an experimental general education program and was named by President Fair as director of a newly created Bureau of Placements in 1934. As early as 1932, Ryle had been influential in Democrat Party politics and had been encouraged by Fair to take upon himself the role of political agent for the college.

On Friday, August 13, 1937, President Fair died of cerebral hemorrhage. The Board of Regents had little trouble in reaching an immediate decision to select Walter Harrington Ryle as the man to succeed Fair. At 5:30 in the afternoon of August 31, 1937, Ryle was notified of his appointment as seventh president of the college. In making the choice the Regents were influenced by many different factors. Dr. Ryle had established the reputation of being one of the college’s finest scholars. He had wide acquaintance throughout the state with men of prominence and influence not only in educational courses but in politics and business as well. He had demonstrated his ability to lead, plan, organize, execute, and achieve and few could understand his love for college or his contributions to it. Many of Ryle’s supporters petitioned members of the Board of Regents to elect him. His appointment as president, therefore, caused no great surprise in the college or the area served by it.

During the next 30 years, Walter Ryle continued to furnish outstanding leadership and make significant contributions to Northeast Missouri State Teachers College. These were years of spectacular growth. Indeed, the college reached its peak of influence as a teachers college. While he was aware that physical surroundings did not themselves guarantee the greatness of a college, he believed that a plant that was not only adequate but beautiful and attractive was as important to an educational institution as proper clothing to a person. Under his leadership the campus increased from 15 acres to one of approximately one hundred acres. Few men, perhaps no one else who might have been elevated to the presidency, would have been so concerned about beautifying the grounds through an elaborate landscaping program as was Walter H. Ryle. This constituted but one of President Ryle’s unique contributions and reflected the reverence

In the University greenhouse, Dr. Ryle checks his prized chrysanthemums.
based on the number of students enrolled. With characteristic
determination and drive he established policies which 30
years later in 1967 had produced a fall enrollment of 5,320
students. Northeast Missouri State Teachers College was no
longer the smallest of the state schools.

Growth in a more cosmopolitan and international enroll-
ment was promoted by President Ryle. He conceived the idea
of bringing students from other countries to Kirksville and
between 1937-1967 more than a thousand international
students from over 60 different countries of the world studied
at NMSTC. His faith in education as a training ground for
a democratic society prompted Dr. Ryle to feel that American
school might be a nucleus for the spread of American
democracy to foreign lands. At the same time he felt that
contact between these young people and Americans would
enlarge the American vision of the world.

President Ryle led the college through the rocky waters
of racial integregation without the disruptions that charac-
terized some colleges. President Ryle was quick to an-
ounce that for several years prior to Brown vs. Board of
Education, the Teachers College had denied no one admis-
sion because of race or color. He emphatically pointed out
that segregation was not an issue for his college and that,
in fact, blacks had studied on campus since 1951. He
publicly stated, “Education recognizes no race or color
lines and neither does Missouri’s oldest teachers college
as it fulfills its task of educating teachers.”

When Walter Ryle became president of the college he
founded the athletic program, for the last year of his life Pres-
ident Fair had proposed abandonment of intercollegiate
athletics. As a student in public school administration Ryle
had learned the value of athletic competition as a builder of
school spirit and as a means of attracting public attention to
the school. Dr. Ryle set about reorganizing the athletic pro-
gram and mounted a campaign for the revival of the “Old
Bulldog Spirit.” So important did he consider intercollegiate
athletics, that he made a point of attending in person the an-
nual meetings of the Missouri Intercollegiate Athletic
Association.

Buildings, grounds, strong enrollments, school spirit, and
athletics were all important to the college, and represent
outstanding accomplishments of the Ryle years, but none of
the above are as vital as the instructional program. No one
understood that more clearly than the college’s president.
Probably his greatest contributions are to be found in the
revitalization of the curriculum and recruitment of an out-
standing faculty. The first major shift, President Ryle deter-
mined, should be in the freshman and sophomore years where
courses of comprehensive scope must be required to give
the future teacher an understanding of the continuity of the
evolution of humanity and an appreciation of the great
spiritual experiences of the human race as recorded in art,
music, and literature. To his death, Dr. Ryle took special
pride in the fact that he had led the Teachers College into
pioneering in the field of general education and made it work.
He required all graduates to take 64 hours of general educa-
tion or liberal arts subjects no matter what the major. He en-
couraged the adoption of the so-called block system of super-
vised teaching experiences for student teachers which has
become the norm in teacher education facilities the nation
over. President Ryle had always argued for a five-year
teacher education program with two years of general or
liberal art foundation. By 1947 he introduced the fifth year
which led to the master of arts degree. By his retirement in

One of Dr. Ryle’s favorite hobbies was duck hunting with his Winchester model 97.
1967, the Teachers College had a fifth year enrollment of 1,269 students. Sharing an equal plane with the curriculum as the object of President Ryle’s keenest concern was the hiring of the faculty. One of his greatest contributions was to build up a faculty of dynamic and inspiring teachers, a faculty possessing sound scholarship, a faculty in sympathy with and understanding problems of young men and women. He greatly increased the number of faculty who held doctoral degrees. Teaching ability and scholarship ranked as the first requisites for a notable faculty. Course offerings were expanded. New degree programs such as nursing education were added along with a new Division of Special Programs which was comprised of the area of reading, special education, speech pathology, and audiology. From September 2, 1867, to September 2, 1967, there were 833 regular faculty members, each serving a period of nine months or more. During his presidency Walter Harrington Ryle hired 438 of those or more than half of all professors serving in the first 100 years of the Teachers College.

Another major contribution that Walter Ryle made to the college was an administrative reorganization. His administrative duties during the closing years of Fair’s administration convinced him that the college had outgrown its administrative system. He organized the administrative bureaus within newly-created administrative divisions with a head in charge of each division directly responsible to the president, thus, bringing about efficiency and economy, and placing direct responsibility and authority upon the administrative division heads. President Ryle made it clear from the beginning of his administration “that he and he alone” must be the college’s representative and spokesman before the Board of Regents, the state legislature, and the general public.

After 50 years Walter Harrington Ryle decided it was time to leave the college. He was at the age where it was necessary to retire. President Ryle decided to decorate and furnish the Student Union building as a “fitting climax to his administration.” He retired on June 1, 1966.

By Doug Ryle
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President and first lady Ryle relax in the living room of their home close to the time of his retirement.