Introduction

Can a man without a college degree become a university dean? Well, it happened at the University of Florida and this is the real story.

Beginning in 1903, Rae Weimer's story provides a unique picture of Midwest rural life at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Rae related, growing up in a small farming community in Nebraska in his early years instilled in him a sense of adventure and required resourcefulness. The Weimer family's small farm did not provide sufficient income for a family of four, so Rae and his family devised a fascinating assortment of means to earn a living. These endeavors afforded him a variety of experiences and enabled him to gain an understanding and appreciation for the laborer, the farmer, and the common man. Some of his jobs included trapping animals, breaking horses, laying track for the railroad, and delivering newspapers. He tells of many other ingenious and innovative ways to make ends meet as he paints a picture of what life was like in a small Midwestern town during this historical time.

Although Rae was working his way through college, he was forced to leave after three years because of a lack of funds. As a rambling journalist moving from paper to paper throughout the Midwest during the depression era, Rae spent the next quarter century learning by working in the newspaper business. In this book you will see how he lived and coped through his eyes.

Rae's longest newspaper stint was the eight years he worked as the managing editor for one of the boldest experiments in journalism—a daily newspaper that hired the best writers, photographers, and journalists but did not sell any advertising. A newspaper whose motto was, "We don't like people who push other people around." Much has been written over the years about Ralph Ingersoll's experimental, but short-lived, New York daily newspaper, *PM*—more than can, or should, be included in this biography. You will learn the *PM* story from Rae's perspective and

why it was important in his life. After *PM* suspended publication, Rae's experience and reputation at the paper undoubtedly led to his hiring by the University of Florida in their small journalism department.

Even in the face of challenges and adversity, Rae, ever the optimist, never let his problems get him down. He had learned the lessons of hard work, resourcefulness, and innovation to cope from his parents. He took life as it came. Unforeseen circumstances altered Rae's dreams, reshaping his career path. When obstacles arose, Rae, undiscouraged, found other avenues to pursue.

What made this peripatetic journalist finally settle in one place? Was it that he found a fit with his life philosophy to help his fellow man? Was it meeting another like-minded newspaper woman who wanted to share his life and raise a family rather than focusing just on her own career? In Ruth Meister, Rae Weimer found a partner whose first priority was her family, yet she still found it possible to use her own journalistic talents and serve her community while supporting her husband's career.

An anecdote Rae told about himself encapsulates his personality. When he first arrived at the University of Florida, without a college degree, a professor asked Rae how he would like to be addressed—Dean Weimer, Dr. Weimer, Professor Weimer? Rae replied, "You can just call me Rae." Long after Rae retired in 1974, he finally became a "man of letters" when the university awarded him an honorary doctor of letters. Rae was instrumental in the evolution of the small department of journalism into the School of Journalism and Communications and finally, into one of the nation's most highly acclaimed Colleges of Journalism and Communications, making Rae a dean without a college degree, the culmination of his incredible career in journalism. Beyond that, he was highly respected by the university's academia, a civic leader in his community, and a mentor to generations of young journalists.

How did this man of limited means and no college degree found one of the country's most prestigious journalism institutions? What were the forces that shaped who he would become? Was it his early exposure to the everyday common folk—the farmer, the laborer, the union member—that fashioned his moral principles? Rae Weimer was a true humanist who cared about fairness and equality. Certainly, his older brother had a tremendous impact on the path Rae's life would follow.

The brothers often worked together for many of the same organizations. Another influence was working for the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain, known for its support of unions and the common man, and then for *PM* with its very liberal philosophy.

Most of Rae's story is told in his own words recorded in 1988. Had Rae not set out to tell his own life story, we would not know what factors molded his personality and set him on the path to success. We would not know how he faced adversity and overcame obstacles. There is no other information about his early life and the influences that eventually led him to the University of Florida, save a few quotes from interviews and transcriptions of the cassette tapes he recorded eight years before his death. Without the background story told by Rae himself, we could not answer these questions. Most of those who knew Rae best are now deceased, leaving little documentation or memories of his life. Much more is known of Rae's later years at the University of Florida because of items written by colleagues and journalists. What follows is the life story of this scion of pioneers who himself was a pioneer in Florida journalism.

1 Scion of Pioneers

America as we know it today was largely founded by immigrants, Rae Weimer's family among them. "The Weimer Saga dates back to Germany and probably to Weimar, Germany, at least on the paternal side," Rae believed. "My mother's ancestors, Fosters and Wilders, came from Great Britain. One of the voids in my family history is a record dating back to the immigration to America. The data I document comes from the family Bible, which recorded births, marriages, and deaths in pioneer times. For decades such records from family Bibles were accepted in the legal system because no such evidence was kept by the local governments for births, deaths, and marriages. Even up into the twentieth century there were no local records kept by the counties of births in Nebraska."

Internet searches yield ancestral records for Rae's family dating back to the late 1500s in Europe. Although "Weimer" in German translates as "one who came from Weimar," the first mention of the Weimer name in genealogy was Michel Weimer, born in 1624 in the Lower Rhine region of Alsace, France. Many of Rae's paternal ancestors hailed from all over Germany as well as a few from England and a number from Alsace. The majority of these ancestors immigrated to Pennsylvania and then joined other early settlers moving westward, first to Ohio and Illinois, and then on to Nebraska. The maternal Foster side of his family had roots in Great Britain—England, Scotland, and Ireland—and possibly in America among Native Americans. Ancestral records that abound today on the internet were not available during his life, so Rae did not know of his rich ancestral history, but he did know the path his forefathers paved: "Both sets of my grandparents were pioneers. As newlyweds, each couple joined in that ever increasing movement of the mid-1800s to push the frontier ever westward." As more of the wilderness was settled for farming, more people continued moving west.

Although he had no recollection of his mother's parents, Rae did know of their history: "My mother's parents, Franklin H. Foster and Mary Elizabeth Wilder, were married in 1878 at Beaver Crossing, Nebraska. Shortly after they were married they moved to Seward, Nebraska, where Franklin established his office as a land agent. Two daughters, Kittie Mable Foster, my mother, and Emma Clara Foster, were born in Seward on November 28, 1879, and September 28, 1881, respectively. Intrigued by the federal government's distribution of vast acres of land, Franklin Foster packed up his family, boarded a train and arrived in Mason City, Nebraska, about 1885—the farthest west the Burlington Railroad operated at that time. The arrival of the railroad had been a great incentive for settlement and expansion of the state. It was not a long-lasting happy move. Emma died at the age of twelve in 1893, her death at such an early age [apparently from] some common childhood disease and lack of medical care. [My maternal grandfather] died five years later and my maternal grandmother died in 1906, meaning neither she nor her husband reached the age of fifty. My mother did have a grandmother, Jane Wilder, who lived in Pomona, California, but I never met my great grandmother."

In contrast to not knowing his maternal grandparents, Rae noted, "The only relatives I ever came to know well were those on the Weimer side of the family. Until I left for college, I had frequent contacts with my paternal grandparents, but did not have the foresight to question them about family history. What a loss! Even if they had no records, the stories they could have told would have been of great value to their descendants." Partly for this reason, Rae dictated his own story and life history.

Rae's auburn-haired paternal grandfather, David F. Weimer, was born in Harrison County, Ohio, in 1839. "I was very fond of my [paternal] grandfather, David F. Weimer," Rae remembered, "and had many contacts with him in my early childhood." During the Civil War, David enlisted in the 19th Ohio Volunteer Infantry of the Union Army at age twenty-one. David, perhaps the first "journalist" in the family, kept a diary consisting of three or four small pocket notebooks chronicling his Civil War experiences. Although never wounded, he suffered many privations, including almost starving to death, as a prisoner of war for fourteen months. First captured in the Battle of Stones River, or Murfreesboro, in

January 1863, he was transported by train, then marched from place to place until the prisoners, some clad only in threadbare blankets, arrived at Camp Parole, Maryland, where they found smallpox, mumps, cold, and hunger. On the night of February 15, David Weimer and four others "broke for home." For twelve days, the escapees dodged picket lines, forded icy streams, begged for scraps of food, and slept in sheds and ditches until they crossed the Pennsylvania state line and found haven at Morrisons Cove. David then returned to his unit and served his country until he was again captured at the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863 by the "sesech," as he called the Confederates, and transferred first to Belle Island and then Libby Prison, both near Richmond, Virginia. He eventually ended up in the most infamous of Civil War prisons, Camp Sumter, or Andersonville as it was more commonly known. David estimated there were some 30,000 soldiers in a large, fifteen-acre stockade with only minimal shelter, clothing, food, or water. His imprisonment left David in poor health from which he never really recovered. David was able to return home to Ohio in 1865 to marry his sweetheart, Mary Kryder. Both were natives of Ohio. "As I understand, the Weimer family was the first family to get a federal land grant in the state of Ohio," Rae recalled. "There were a lot of Weimers in Ohio and until the late 1920s there was a large Weimer reunion held there each year with several hundred people present."

Seven years after their marriage, David and Mary Weimer were among the earliest settlers in Nebraska as Rae tells. "My paternal grandparents, too, joined pioneers moving westward, first to Illinois where three daughters were born. When the Nebraska Territory became the thirty-seventh state in the Union in 1867, word soon spread of vast farmlands being opened up for settlers in the new state. It was too much for pioneering families to resist. My paternal grandparents, David and Mary Weimer, packed up their belongings and three small children, crossed the Mississippi River, came across Iowa and crossed the Missouri River to settle in Otoe County in southeastern Nebraska." There, a fourth daughter and a son were born followed by Rae's father, Curtis, on October 26, 1876, the youngest of five siblings.

The Weimers later settled in the Ortello Valley, where Rae's paternal grandfather, David Weimer, established a Sunday school in his sod

house. One of Rae's aunts and her family also lived in a sod house on a farm eight miles from town. Settlers of the Great Plains found sod a free, as well as plentiful, alternative for housing construction when timber or stone was scarce. Sod homes had the advantage of being fireproof in areas prone to grass fires. They provided excellent insulation—warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer than homes constructed from other materials. Unlike common lawn grass today, the sod house was constructed from a number of prairie grasses with densely packed roots, which held the soil together. The sod was then cut into "bricks" and stacked to form two-foot-thick walls. Scarce wood was used only for framing doors and windows. This method of building homes was common in the second half of the nineteenth century until the railroad made more modern building materials readily accessible.

An intelligent and determined woman, Kittie Foster was the backbone of the Weimer family. Rae admired many of his mother's qualities. He tells of one challenge she overcame in her youth: "In early childhood my mother was left-handed. She learned to write and work with her left hand, which her parents accepted as natural. But early in elementary school, a male teacher informed her that he did not permit students in his class to write with the left hand. Whether she alternated hands in other classes I don't know, but throughout her adult life she wrote very well with either hand without any marked difference. My mother . . . was the first girl to graduate from the high school. She and two boys comprised the first high school graduating class in Mason City, Nebraska."

When Rae's paternal grandmother, Mary, died at age 101 in 1925, the local newspaper hailed her as one of the "real pioneer mothers of Nebraska and Custer County." Grandma Weimer always looked on the bright side of life and accepted the privations and toil of pioneer life with fortitude, traits she may have passed on to her grandson, Rae Weimer, who became a journalism pioneer. In addition to Grandma Weimer's optimism, willingness to work hard, and perseverance, Rae later displayed other characteristics of the early pioneers including honesty, humility, close ties to family, and an eagerness to help others in the community.