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James W. Silver to George, 14 December 1961

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December 14, 1961

Dear George:

For a couple of days I have been meaning to write you - but have put it off, largely because I have felt like hell since my hernia was patched up. The month of November was hectic for several reasons (and there was some strain in September and October that I'll tell you about some day) and with it all, as you might have guesseed, my skin began acting up and I've been in something of a dither. I'm sure I'll get over this, for I usually do, but at the moment I'm somewhat at the bottom of one of my sloughs of despond.

I could see, some time back, that there might be building up some little embarrassments in the casual way we approached the summer school business, and Now I feel that I don't quite know what to write. So I'll put down what comes to mind and I hope you will show it to Cox or whoever else may be concerned.

In the 1st place you know that from the beginning all the Silvers have looked forward to a summer in the Northwest. Our prime motive has been to spend some time with the Carbones.

But, this course load, at least on paper, almost scares me. I don't want to put in another summer of frustration such as the one at Harvard (where I taught a Friedel course that no one yet has explained to me). Anyway, it seems that I'm down for three courses. I'm sure this means three hours a day, for how many days of the week I'm not sure. But this is, it seems to me, the equivalent of a 15 to 18 hour teaching load when, as you know I'm used to 8 or 9. Then the courses; "The Era of Sectional Conflict" is, of course, the item I'm working on and know something about. "Era of Reconstruction" I know damned little about but could work it up as I went along. "Forces and Influences in American History" is beyond my comprehension at the moment. It could mean anything and in any case would mean a new course for me. Now, whether I'm up to teaching three hours a day depends on the size of the classes mainly. If they are large I just can't do it. On the other hand if I could sit around with a relatively small number of students in the Reconstruction course, and talk about books, with reports, etc. I could get through that all right. Aside from the Sectional Conflict business, the field in which I can do well without a hell of a lot of preparation is Recent American - which I have taught for twenty years. I know the bibliography, etc.

What I'm trying to avoid is what happened at Harvard. I taught my two classes, then met with students a large part of every afternoon, and then worked like hell the rest of the time getting ready for the next day. It wasn't any fun and I doubt whether I did too well. At least on the Friedel course. Also, in the past four summers I have taught no more in any day than two classes. That is a reasonable load. How many students there are in each of two classes would make no difference to me. It is just the strain of going through three classes each day. Even with a patched up hernia that would be difficult.

Now, I'm not looking forward to a summer of ease, anywhere. Neither am I looking forward to a summer of harassment, which I'm sure would lead to all sorts of skin trouble before it were over. But, at Emory I taught two three hours classes, at Harvard two three hour classes, at Missouri three two hour classes, and at Virginia one two hour class. Six hours credit, in the last, for the eight weeks.

I had hoped, this summer, besides having a little fun to put in a lot of time reading for the book I'm working on. This has become something of a passion with me because I'm trying to write my first good book. Next year I intend to take off completely. That is, I have a Social Science grant provided the Univ. will come through with a sabbatical. I probably should take off the summer for this job and can, as far as cash goes, for the Social Science people have been very liberal - this all depends on Ole Miss, of course.

The salary for the right weeks summerschool is the best I have ever been offered. But one knows better than you that with transportation it becomes somewhat marginal. As you know I can teach here for 6 weeks (on my own terms) and get 1000 or 12 weeks and get 2000 - and they are always talking about going up.

If we get to Oregon by June 18 we'll have to skip Bill's graduation, which doesn't bother me, but does Dutch. (He's here, trying out for a Rhodes - he and a boy from Ole Miss won the Mississippi competition, but Bill at least will be clobbered in New Orleans on Friday.)

All this may not be very clear because I am, really, at a low point. I want to do a good job, my best, at whatever I do. It seems to me that three classes a day are too damned much, unless, perhaps (and I'm not sure of this perhaps) they are damned small. As for two classes a day, I wouldn't mind how many students you piled into them. And I don't want to spend the summer getting up a new course, regardless of how eager I am for new knowledge.

Well, as I said in the beginning, please read this over with a grain or two of sympathy. I'm not the bargaining type, as you ought to know. But I also know something about my capacities and capabilities. I would like to enjoy a summer in Oregon, not end up in the Pacific. You may have all young, energetic men out there but I guess I'm neither. I can give you your money's worth, and would probably do more, but I'd like to live to remember it all.

I'll hold Dr. Watson's form here until I hear from you. Won't be going to the American - but will be on the MVHA program in the spring.

Yours,