III

By war’s end, in 1945, the University was braced for the influx of returning veterans who were expected to take advantage of the GI Bill of Rights. In November, 1942, FDR, peering over the horizon at the postwar world and determined to avoid the bitter conditions World War I vets faced on their return—jobs taken by civilians, severe unemployment, inflation, debt, and lack of education and job skills—appointed a study commission whose report led, in 1944, to Public Law 346. It was one of the most creative pieces of legislation in the nation’s history, as well as the final New Deal attempt to carry out the “general welfare” provisions of the Constitution. It provided low-interest home loans and technical training. And in a stroke it democratized American higher education, for it made a college education affordable for the first time to millions of youths for whom it would otherwise have
been no more than a wistful dream. It not only revitalized the nation’s colleges, it also transformed and propelled them, over the next decades, to world preeminence, particularly on the graduate level. And its salutary effects on the nation at large have been incalculable. Of the multitude of vets who used the bill, more than 10,000 studied at Kent, second only to OSU among Ohio’s institutions.

Planning for the expected veterans began in 1943, under acting president Dr. Raymond N. Clark, and proceeded apace after the Trustees, in July 1944, hired George A. Bowman as the school’s fifth president. But no planning could contain the numbers that, each year, poured through every door and window of a campus already cramped for classroom and living space by the “building holiday” of the thirties. Between 1945 and 1948 the flood crested higher each term, forcing Bowman to improvise. He took a leaf from McGilvrey’s book and opened an extension center in Canton to accommodate the overflow. He had five prefab hospital units, a gift of the Federal Housing Authority, trucked from Marion, Ohio, and assembled on the corner of Terrace Drive and Main Street. Called “Terrace Lodge,” the prefabs served as temporary residence halls for men; the first permanent one, Stopher Hall, didn’t open until September 1949. Other two-storied prefabs were set along the western edge of the Commons and converted into classrooms, always either too hot or too cold.

A single-story prefab, placed near the Heating Plant, became the school’s first student center. In the Hub the air crackled day and night with the electricity of intense, cigarette-puffing young men and women wearing the brave souvenirs of their sacrifice—men in flight jackets, fatigues, khaki pants, Ike jackets, jump boots; women in blue navy blouses and olive drab skirts—some arguing, some studying, some reading newspapers, but all seeming ablaze with the adventure of getting an education, of making up for lost time. Married vets rented rooms in town or lived in prefab housing units in Windham; the car-less students were bused to and from campus. Some mothers lugged their babies to classrooms and library. A widely printed photo of 1946 showed two men picketing on Main Street in sandwich-boards that said: “HOW ABOUT A BED/ for a VET... CAN’T GO TO SCHOOL UNLESS YOU HELP.” And the townspeople did help, opening up their spare rooms.
Karl Clayton Leebrick, Kent’s controversial fourth president (1938-1943), introduced radical changes designed to emphasize graduate programs, make liberal arts the school’s ‘backbone,’ and raise standards.

Dr. Oscar Ritchie, professor of sociology from 1947 to 1967, was the first African American to be appointed to a faculty position in any field at any state university in Ohio. Named in his honor, Oscar Ritchie Hall houses the Department of Pan-African Studies, and a minority scholarship competition carries his name in recognition of his service to his alma mater.

Fresh women (upper right) “dink” upperclass men in front of the original “Hub,” a prefabricated building torched by war protesters on May 2, 1970. Dinking was a benign form of freshman hazing popular on college campuses into the sixties.

Along with overflowing intellectual and creative energy, the vets brought an informal, sometimes puckish, spirit to campus. After years of the hurry-up-and-wait of military life, they found themselves dawdling in long registration lines. One day two D-Day vets desperate to register for a famously easy freshman composition course put their military training to use. They scaled the east wall of Merrill Hall and crawled through the second floor window behind a desk where another English professor, Margaret Stopher, was registering students in a line that snaked along the hall, down the staircase, to the first floor.

Outflanked, and amused by their daring, she signed them up. Then there was Commodore, the bulldog that escorted historian A. Sellew Roberts to his office in Merrill Hall. It was Commodore’s pleasure to stroll into the hallway while Roberts was lecturing. One day some vets put a jockstrap on Commodore and watched as he waddled back into the office. No sooner had the bell sounded the change of classes than Roberts, who had been Kent’s first wrestling coach, exploded into the hallway, rolling up his sleeves and challenging the pranksters to fisticuffs.