

# IU student challenges went too far in fall of 1904

"formaldehyde or methanal ... a flammable, poisonous colorless gas with a suffocating odor."

— *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 1975 edition.

Around the turn of the century, a rite of passage for incoming freshmen males at Indiana University was a challenge by their counterparts in the sophomore class. At times the conflict got very physical and resulted in bruises and broken bones.

IU President William Lowe Bryan was not really an old fogey. He had about as much patience as other adults for the pranks of adolescents. The fall of 1904 to-do was too much for him.

The *Bloomington Telephone* of Oct. 11, 1904, gave a tongue-in-cheek description of what happened. The headline read "NOISY STUDENTS" and explained, "For a week there has been a yelling like territory Indians and slugging that would do justice to prize fighters, until those a stranger to the college idea would expect every morning to find the college campus and adjoining streets strewn with dead and wounded."

Native Bloomingtonians knew better. The



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

freshman-sophomore scraps were annual ordeals that had to be gotten through while hoping that no student (or townspeople, for that matter) would be seriously injured.

Oct. 10 was the day chosen by the freshmen to elect their class officers, and they had assembled in the university gymnasium. Unfortunately, the sophomores had planned ahead.

The newspaper described what a committee of seven sophomores came up with in the way of harassing the freshmen. "Formaldehyde is about the next thing to condensed fertilizer, so the valiant sophs provided themselves with syringes, and crawling under the floors of the gymnasium, bored holes, then proceeded to shoot the extract into the assembly room."

If the sophomores had thought the chemical would send freshmen rushing for the

doors, they were disappointed. Nothing happened until a lone sophomore took matters into his own hands. The *Telephone* described what happened next. "... one young man, with a bottle filled with the favorite college perfume (formaldehyde), slipped up in the gallery and was squirting the fluid down on the lower floor ..."

President Bryan was not amused. He spotted E.J. Kempf of Jasper in the gallery and "With finger pointed straight at the soph - yet with bottle in hand - the President commanded the soph to come down, and as he did so, Dr. Bryan met him at the door and escorted him to his office."

There was a lot of speculation on the campus about what would happen to Kempf. The speculation certainly didn't call a halt to the freshman-sophomore feuding. "The freshmen managed to conclude their meeting and later the contest was renewed. By 10 o'clock last night scores of students were scrapping, and the warfare was carried up town and the police had to interfere."

What happened to Mr. Kempf? His sophomore classmates didn't have long to speculate over it. A front-page article in the

Oct. 14 edition of the *Telephone* revealed the student's fate. "E.J. Kempf, of Jasper, the sophomore who threw formaldehyde into the gymnasium where the freshmen were holding their election last Friday, has been suspended from Indiana University. The decision was reached at a faculty meeting yesterday."

Some of Kempf's classmates had expected the faculty disciplinary committee to be more lenient, taking a boys-will-be-boys approach to the prank. The "sentence" came to quickly for the sophomores who were collecting signatures of students on a petition asking for no penalty for Kempf.

Although several sophomores were trying to call an "indignation meeting," they might as well have saved their efforts. Kempf was made of sterner stuff. He later returned to IU and finished his bachelor's degree in 1907. The *Register of Graduates* for 1830-1916, noted that after graduation from IU, Edward John Kempf got a doctor of medicine degree from Western Reserve University and at printing time was a clinical psychiatrist in a government hospital for the insane in Washington, D.C.

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