

# IU's first female student shines at commencement

Sarah Parke Morrison, the first female to attend Indiana University, was determined that her contribution to commencement would be equal to or better than that of any of her male classmates.

Looking back at the end of her final year as an undergraduate student at IU, she wrote in 1911, "I could not come down to their notions. Could I lift them up to mine? Not without all the help I could get from heaven and earth."

And she was expecting help. In fact, it was supposed to have come from a professor who taught elocution. He had promised to coach her, but at the moment when she needed his help most, he found he had other commitments.

The problem was that at the commencements in the 1860s each graduate was expected to give not merely a speech, but a polished oration.



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

The exercises were an all-day affair, with families and friends eating a picnic lunch during the break at noon.

The elocution professor did the next best thing for Morrison by writing down explicit instructions for her to use in preparing her speech, the title of which was "Name Pariter Pax Bello" or "From War, Peace."

Morrison wrote, "The choice of topic must be popular. It was not so far from the Civil War that its echoes did not thrill in one's veins. I believed then in a defensive war . . .

Essay? Never! It should have in it all the fire I was capable of."

Before following the professor's instructions, Morrison went home to Indianapolis to have a dress made for the commencement exercises. Next she packed a trunk with all she would need for the return to Bloomington. And lastly, she took the professor's advice.

That involved going to stay with her aunt, Joanna Parker, who lived near Ravville. The rural setting was perfect for the young graduate's rehearsals.

Morrison spelled out the professor's instructions that she was to "go into the country, if possible, where I would be entirely uninterrupted, and practice the vowel sounds, etc., according to his directions, 20 minutes at a time, followed by 20 minutes rests, from morning until noon and again, sufficient re-

laxation, till night in the open air, whenever practicable, and then I would speak with ease, be heard in every part of the chapel and surprise myself as well as please my friends."

Please them she did. As Morrison put it, "And I came off with my oration with such eclat, the band struck up "Yankee Doodle" and Dr. (Joseph) McPheeters wrote me a nice letter, praising Father and Mother for what I had been able to do."

Even as she savored the compliments on her oration, Morrison remembered a disagreement with her classmates just before commencement. A senior class meeting was held to decide if one should be elected to represent them with a speech at the exercises. Morrison described what happened.

She asked her fellow students,

"Which of you gentlemen will represent me?" That decided it. However the next day, the class president informed me they were intending to reconsider the vote. 'You have heard what I have to say. My appeal will be to the board,' was my reply."

Concluding her recollections, which appeared in the *Bloomington Weekly Courier* of Aug. 25, 1911, Morrison wrote, "I have seemed to coast, but it has been to show what one poor soul can do when put upon her mettle and trusting God for counsel. Commencement day as I sat on the rostrum feeling weak, that I could do no more. I said in silent appeal, 'I have done my part. I can do no more, help me through.'"

Postscript: Sarah Parke Morrison went on to receive the Master of Arts degree from IU in 1872 and taught at the university as tutor and adjunct professor of English from 1873 to 1875.