

Phrenology craze hit Bloomington in 1838, Wylie says in diary

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bumps. On Jan. 21, 1838, Wylie wrote in his diary, "In common with all the rest of the town, I have been set crazy with phrenology . . . not knowing what to say respecting the truth of this art or science, I have been attending to the lectures delivered and have joined the class which will commence tomorrow so that I may know on what grounds I believe or disbelieve it."

The spreader of the word about phrenology was K.E. Burhans. According to the Bloomington Post, the visitor to the community gave a couple of free lectures to attract attention and charged money thereafter for additional instruction. Commented the Post, "Mr. Burhans is doing a cash business here, and from the best information that we can gain, he will make near three hundred dollars. Who wouldn't be a phrenologist?"

The newspaper editor hedged his bet on the validity of the science by agreeing with Wylie — that it looked interesting, but plausibility and truth were not exactly the same thing. Wylie described one of the public ses-

sions in which Burhans' head readings were extremely accurate. "Another gentleman ascended the stage. Self-conceit, want of conscience, and indolence were his characteristics. Another was examined. Both characters corresponded exactly with their phrenological descriptions." ~ ~

Even IU President Andrew Wylie submitted his head for a reading and received a favorable analysis. Wrote his cousin, Theophilus, "One could hardly help believing that the doctor knew all about the individual he was examining."

As for the editor of the Post, he told his readers, "We do not believe in falling in with any new doctrine until we have fairly weighed the matter and watched its progress for some time."

In an unusual gesture to his readers, the editor issued an invitation for their comments. His editorial concluded, "Our columns are open for any argument (we do not mean personal abuse) which may be produced in favor or against the doctrine of phrenology."

Next week: Public reactions