

'Bates School' left an impression

Indiana University's seventh president, David Starr Jordan, called the little regular get-togethers the "Bates School of Philosophy."

IN THE EVENINGS of the 1880's, town and gown got together informally in a cobbler's shop on the west side of the Bloomington square. In James Woodburn's *History of Indiana University* Jordan is quoted as writing that the non-credit gatherings were named for the shop's proprietor, Henry Sanders Bates, a self-styled philosopher without academic degrees.

In the *Alumni Quarterly* of 1917, Jordan told his readers how he stumbled across the rather unorthodox group. It seemed that around 1880 Jordan had given an IU Chapel lecture on the writings of Henry David Thoreau, the philosopher of Walden Pond. In a discussion after his talk on Thoreau, Jordan was buttonholed by Bates and James A. Karsell, partner in a grocery business next door to Bates' shoe shop.

Jordan wrote: "They were interested directly in Thoreau and it occurred to me that they knew as much about Thoreau as I did."

JORDAN MAY HAVE been initially amused by the prospect of a discussion with a couple of "townies" but it is evident he had become a believer when he wrote: "without much formal education he (Bates) did a good deal of thinking

Looking back

6-13-1981

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and was withal a man of generous sympathies and friendly interest, brought like-minded men to sit at his feet."

Bates was not a Monroe County native, having been born in Indianapolis, but notes in the IU Archives indicate that he was educated in the Bloomington public schools. How he came to settle in the county or what kind of education he received here is not recorded, but it is known that between 1870 and 1872 he pursued the career of an actor. However, his marriage in August of 1872 to a Mary Ellen Ryan apparently brought an end to that phase of his life.

On his way to becoming the self-styled philosopher of Jordan's memory, Bates worked as a postal clerk and served as a treasurer for the City of Bloomington, a post he held from 1885 to 1889. He also fathered nine children named Grace, Lloyd, Mary, Arthur, Belle, Allan, Walter, Everleigh and Weir.

A COUPLE OF well-known charter members

of the "Bates School of Philosophy" were the ninth and 10th presidents of Indiana University, Joseph Swain and William Lowe Bryan. The cobbler's Bloomington students of philosophy, who also received academic degrees in the subject, were Preston Eagleson, James C. Faris and Homer Woolery.

Woodburn wrote: "When a new member was initiated into the Bates School he had to 'set up' the ice cream sodas to all the members who were present, and this initiation fee might cost him seventy-five cents or a dollar. Once, so the story goes, Professor (Amzi) Atwater, who was standing by, was called in for the treat, but he expressed a preference for a lead pencil over the soda water — so thrifty was his mind!"

Of Bates, Jordan affectionately said: "He was a master of that quaint, dry Hoosier wit, which, in those days, blossomed into poetry in Jim Riley, into real eloquence in Will Bryan, and which in its highest manifestation has rarely flourished outside of Indiana."

JORDAN ADDED: "I was not one of the charter members of the group; I was too busy with fishes and people. I missed many of the best sessions, and now I cannot remember in detail a single sapient conclusion. But its general impression will always remain with me."

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