

Indiana University location had fans, foes in early 1850s

"I am well pleased with the college, professors, students and studies," wrote John W. Foster, a student at Indiana University in the early 1850s. Foster, a Pike County farm boy, told his friend, John B. Elliott of New Harmony, that IU was "the cheapest, most pleasant and most thorough in its studies of any institution in the state."

Foster's letters in the university archives contain some glimpses of what life was like in Bloomington in the 1850s, when IU was experiencing some serious, life-threatening difficulties. Of note in the letters are enrollment figures. Wrote Foster in October of 1851: "... there is about one hundred and twenty-five students in attendance at present and more coming in daily; by Christmas there will be at least one hundred and seventy-five."

(Not everyone was pleased about the location of the state university in Bloomington. Even while Foster



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

5-16-1987

was enumerating the advantages of the town, the editor of the Indianapolis *Locomotive* printed what was supposed to have been a letter to the editor: "Those who have an acquaintance with the place object to sending their children there on account of the litigious, quarrelsome, tricky character of a great many of the people there. The students become contaminated. I have often heard men remark that they never knew a politician educated at Bloomington who was not a Janus-faced political gouger.")

Foster, on the other hand, relayed some practical information to his friend in New Harmony — details

about costs and clothing and where to live. "You can get board at one dollar and a quarter out at the edge of town or you can board at the club (IU) at about a dollar a week." Foster admitted that the food wasn't very good at the club, but it was a good place to study.

As for clothing, Foster related to Elliott: "The students do not have very fine clothes, so you will not have to buy any better dress than if you stayed at home, and you will not (need) very much pocket money, for there are not many amusements here."

Unlike the letter-writer to the *Locomotive*, Foster liked the setting of the university. In fact, he called it "the prettiest country in Indiana, with a few exceptions." That students had already ranged at some distance from the campus itself was evident in Foster's other comments: "... there are two or three caves

see Looking back, Back page