

Glimpse of early IU comes from letter to the editor

What was Indiana University like in 1838? A "word photograph" of the faculty and some students can be found in the Nov. 10, 1838, issue of the *Indiana Journal* published in Indianapolis.

The picture of the university is in the form of a letter-to-the-editor from a man who called himself "Traveller." Did he approve of what he saw on the campus? Read on.

It is curious that the letter is headed with "Indiana College," since it had already been elevated to the status of university by the Indiana General Assembly during the previous February.

But back to Traveller, who didn't say how long he spent in Bloomington, but there is a suggestion that he may have been visiting an acquaintance. (An unnamed professor provided a choice seat near the platform for Traveller during the commencement exercises.)

The visitor began his letter by praising the scenery of Indiana and then proceeded to the state's intellectual condition. He continued, "I had the very best opportunity of judging of it in this latter respect as I was so fortunate as to be present at the late examination and commencement of the State College."

There followed an endorsement that would make any Hoosier proud. "The people of Indiana may well be proud of such an in-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

stitution. Not only does it stand at the head of all western colleges, but it would compare honorably with the most flourishing colleges at the east."

In enumerating the faculty, Traveler began at the top with President Andrew Wylie. He was described as "noble looking" with an "intellectual and highly expressive countenance."

Readers today may smile at another comment about President Wylie. "There is something about his expanded brow and strongly marked head that would throw a phrenologist into ecstasies." That comment was not all that far-fetched, since phrenology — the belief that a person's character can be determined by the contours of the head — was a fad looking for scientific acceptance. Wylie was, at the very least, trying to be open-minded about the subject.

(There are some notes in the diary of Theophilus Wylie, cousin of the college president. In the diary we learn that phrenology

was getting serious consideration in Bloomington. A practitioner was in town in January of 1838, and Andrew Wylie let the man "read" his head.

Traveller visited Professor Beaumont Parks' class, deriving a great deal of pleasure in the presence of a man who "has communed so much with the sages of antiquity ..." Concluded Traveller, "I never knew the Greek language possessed so much melody and richness until I heard it read by Professor Parks ..."

It is possible that Traveller did not observe a class of Professor Augustus Ruter, who taught modern languages. The visitor's opinion — "fine appearance" and "dignified manner" — seems to be second hand. He did add that Ruter was popular with the students.

Traveller probably didn't visit Professor James F. Dodds' classroom, either. The comments about him are somewhat vague.

Having cataloged the faculty, Traveller proceeded to the commencement ceremony. We learn that there were 11 graduates, each of whom was obliged to give a speech.

Traveller apparently took notes of each of the 11 speakers, but had misplaced them when he was writing his letter-to-the-editor. Drawing on his recollections, the writer gave mental prizes to the fifth and 10th speakers. If

the students spoke in alphabetical order, the ones selected by Traveller would have been Samuel C. Parks, who came to the university from Middlebury, Vt., and George E. West of Salem, Mass.

"The first was characterized by great originality of thought and boldness of expression. He also manifested deep research into the history and philosophy of the past." As for speaker No. 10, Traveller admired the "poetry throughout. The wing of that speaker's fancy never failed, but bore him on his graceful flight to the regions of song without weariness or rest."

Traveller concluded that it would not be surprising if the Indiana College produced a future president of the United States. (Seventeen years later a future U.S. Secretary of State graduated from the university.) The Class of 1838 did provide some community leaders — two teachers, a minister and three judges. One was appointed by Abraham Lincoln to a judgeship in one of the western territories.

What of the faculty Traveller met? In 1839, the employment at IU of Parks, Ruter and Dodds, to put it politely, was not renewed. He would not have been impressed with the 1839 version of the college which consisted of a president, one professor and a principal of the Preparatory Department.

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