

Early student's biography gives glimpse of old IU

An early first-hand account of what life was like for Indiana University students can be found in James Woodburn's history of the university. Fortunately, Matthew Elder, who received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1840, wrote an autobiography, and Woodburn had an opportunity to copy parts of it.

Elder, who was born in Chester County, S.C., in 1813, had been educated by private tutors. Having relatives who had already migrated to the west, he decided to at least come and have a look.

He was 22 days on the road on horseback, for 700 miles of the journey entirely alone. On the last leg of his travels he was accompanied by a brother-in-law, a Mr. Hemphill.

The arrival of Elder coincided with the Sunday morning service at the Associate Reformed Church in Bloomington. As he looked around the congregation, the young man could see many persons he had known back in Chester County.

Eventually, Elder paid a visit to IU President Andrew Wylie in regard to enrolling at the university. His autobiography continues,



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

"I was not subjected to a formal examination. In language I was far in advance, but for want of a competent guide in preparation my mathematics had been neglected, and this being a broken session I was anxious to remedy this defect."

Looking back at his years at IU, Elder was proud of his record. "I was never summoned before the faculty for a misdemeanor nor reprimanded for an inferior recitation." With the exceptions of a 12-day illness and attendance at a wedding, he was never absent from class.

Saturday was not a day off for students. Elder explained. "Every Saturday in the chapel we had exercises in composition, declamation and debating, hearing them criticized. In addition to this every member of the literary societies was required to deliver an original

address in alphabetical order at the opening of every meeting."

Elder included the names of his closest friends while he was studying at IU. They were J. Robert Cravens, A.C. Lanier, Craig R. Wylie, James Woodburn and Samuel Millen.

According to Elder, it was the students themselves who elected the salutatory and valedictory speakers for commencement. He was chosen to be the salutatory one and was obliged to deliver his speech in Latin and Greek. That speech must have been very boring for those in the audience who had not had the benefit of the study of those languages.

Commencement day was, according to Elder, bright and balmy. Among those in the crowd were "the Governor, the Judges, the literati and the elite of the State were there."

When it was his turn to speak, perhaps Elder was showing off a little bit. He related, "I addressed the Faculty of the University in Greek, the Trustees in Latin, and the audience at large in strong, old native Anglo-Saxon."

Elder did not write about his first impressions of President Wylie, but it is clear that by

the time he left IU he had a healthy respect for his mentor. Elder suspected that the public in general simply didn't understand the educator. "When he (Wylie) walked the streets he appeared abstracted, never shaking hands nor conversing with any one, a nod of recognition being invariably his habit."

But the South Carolina student knew Wylie better than the general public after having worked with the man. "In this way I became very familiar with Dr. Wylie and learned that instead of being distant and stern he was remarkably social and as tender hearted as a child. He and Professor Wylie (Theophilus) visited me when I was sick, walking a mile when they did so."

Elder was granted a Master of Arts degree from IU, but the date of that is uncertain. He returned to South Carolina and took up the profession of teaching. Between 1855 and the Civil War he taught at the Yorkville Female College.

Students of IU history will find some little sketches of other teachers at the university in Elder's autobiography.

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