

Class prank an 1881 incident at IU

Spring fever and the tradition of a class prank made Indiana University look rather silly and raised some eyebrows around the state in 1881.

For some 10 years it had been the custom for the members of the junior class to celebrate the rite of passage to their final year by calling attention to themselves with a demonstration or other means. Another part of the tradition was the thwarting of the demonstration by the next lower class.

Thus it was that near the end of May that the seniors-elect appeared in the classroom of Professor John Newkirk, wearing large straw hats. The scene was the first campus at Seminary Square. What happened was described in the May 21, 1881, edition of the *Bloomington Weekly Telephone*. Having failed to get the hats on at least one earlier occasion, the sophomores stalked the seniors-elect. "This they failed to do (steal the hats) until the seniors-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

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elect were on the first floor reciting, with windows up, when an unsuspected sophomore passed by on the outside, and reaching his hand in, grabbed a hat and started off with it. In the classroom the alarm was given, but Professor Newkirk refused to excuse them, so out the window, like so many sheep, 17 of the class made their way. For this, five of the 17 have been made the victims."

Baptist minister/IU President Lemuel Moss's Victorian sense of decorum was in tatters. The faculty took four hours to decide the fate of the culprits. Their punishment came in the form of letters to five of

the seniors-elect from President Moss. The letters began: "MY DEAR SIR — Your conduct in Prof. Newkirk's room last Saturday, the 7th inst., is deemed by the faculty an act of insubordination and an incitement to insubordination of others. By a unanimous vote of the faculty I am directed to say to you that you are hereby suspended from the University until the 1st day of September next."

The students bristled, but the *Telephone* enjoyed the story enormously, heading its news article with "THE FACULTY HOLD FORTH AT THE OLD STAND. THE BOYS NOW EAT AT HOME."

The newspaper informed its readers that the seniors-elect met to discuss the matter and decided by a vote that "unless terms of equal punishment" were meted out to all, they would "bolt" the university. The faculty's answer to their de-

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