

Former IU president recalled a local character

"I am asked to tell the story of the Bates School of Philosophy as I knew it at Bloomington. I can give no dates and no statistics, for it was a long time ago, and as I write I am a long way from the necessary archives." David Starr Jordan, Chancellor Emeritus of Stanford University in 1917.

It is not known who prompted the former Indiana University president, David Starr Jordan, to scratch his memory and write what he could remember about the "Bates School of Philosophy." The strictly non-credit, informal gatherings in Henry Bates' Bloomington shoe shop during the 1880s left a lasting impression upon those who gravitated there between IU classes.

Bates must have been very much on Jordan's mind in 1917, since he wrote pieces about the shoe maker for the *Indiana University Alumni Quarterly* for April of that year and for the Bloomington *Evening World* edition of Feb. 7.

Describing his acquaintance with Bates, Jordan wrote, "... I may say just here that a man who trains himself may be just as truly an educated man as the one who goes over the smoother road of the universities. The self-educated man has to be more set in



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

his purposes, more 'dead in earnest,' must do a lot more private thinking and it takes him a good deal longer time if he finally arrives. And so it came about Henry Bates mended shoes, educated himself and taught philosophy in Bloomington."

Jordan explained that Bates put shoes together and did some deep thinking during the day. "And then evenings the gentle old men and the wise young men of college gathered round him on stools and benches to gather in his words of wisdom."

Bates, born in Indianapolis on Jan. 18, 1851, set up shop in Bloomington to become the "College Shoemaker." According to Jordan, Bates was a tall, thin man with a pleasant voice and the same kind of quaint, dry wit, which could rarely be found outside of

Indiana.

Furthermore, Bates' English was good, and despite his self-acquired knowledge of the ways of the world, he did not put on any airs. The latter characteristic was perhaps his most endearing feature.

Jordan recalled the names of some of the members of the "Bates School of Philosophy." They included students and university faculty alike. Among them were: two future IU presidents, William Bryan and Joseph Swain, Allan Philputt, Joe Shea; Bert and Jim Fesler; Barton Evermann; Horace Hoffman; Rufus Green; James Woodburn; Carl Eigenmann; Robert Aley; Fletcher Dressler; Will Rawles; Sam Harding; Robert Lyons; Ernest Lindley; Sam Smith, David Goss, Will Sangler, David Curry and Daniel Kirkwood.

Bates apparently was not the kind of scholar who wrote articles to increase his fame. Jordan did, however, remember that the shoemaker-philosopher did write one.

"It was the true story of an old hermit living near Bloomington, a man of one idea who gave his life to the discovery of the 'Unconditioned Force of the Universe' and to the invention of a machine which, by its

own internal power, should overcome friction and, once started, should go on forever. When the machine was displayed before the School of Philosophy it seemed to lack one single essential, the inventor could give no answer to the repeated question, 'Will it work?'"

According to Jordan, the machine never did work, and its inventor died a very disappointed man. Wrote Jordan, "The machine which represents a lifetime of earnest, but unguided thought, rests somewhere in the dusty garret of the Department of Physics."

The Bates School of Philosophy was somewhat changed when an unexpected thing happened. Joseph Swain, who had been elevated to the position of president of IU, appointed Bates as "University Registrar," an executive decision which must have seemed strange to those who were unfamiliar with the shoe maker. In addition, Bates also did what he did best — counsel students.

Bates died in 1895. Jordan concluded that "every man who knew him holds his memory green."

H-T 9/13/93