

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Meg Miner

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The Work and Words of Early Women at IWU

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The Work and Words of Early Women at IWU:

A presentation by Meg Miner at the Panhellenic Tea, Drake Hotel, Chicago, April 25, 2010

Hello! I am honored to be here today and want to thank Ann for inviting me to speak with you. Ann didn't ask me to speak on anything in particular and given 160 years of possible topics in IWU history to draw on, I decided to start with a quote from an early IWU Panhellenic woman. I'll tell you more about her later, but for now just know that these words were spoken in 1874:

"It is an oft repeated assertion, yet none the less true, that the civilization of a country is measured by the position of woman, and we are proud our republic stands in advance. We have aroused to the fact that she who in the home, the family,--the foundation of society,--moulds and dissects the character of men and women of the future, requires for the responsibility a mind none the less disciplined by culture and study. We have awakened to the fact that the highest good of our race demands of woman a culture of mind equal to that of man, and in accordance with this, the doors of many colleges, formerly barred to her, have swung wide on their creaking hinges. Neither to-day, nor ever, can we forget to be grateful that four years ago the Wesleyan University invited to equal privileges sons and daughters."¹

Finding those words made me wonder what other thoughts and ideas early IWU women could offer us today. To my knowledge, they've never been collected in one place and I am certain there are many more voices than just the ones I found to share with you here. But I wanted to let you know a little about these women's interests and lives – things that are not covered in detail in our published histories – when compared to what we do know of our history.

If you are interested in reading a thorough account about our formation, Elmo Scott Watson's well-documented *IWU Story* traces our history from the people who founded the city through the university's beginning in December 1850 and on through our centennial in 1950. For our purposes today, it's enough to say that only male students enrolled in the beginning. It was the custom at the time to separate women and men in collegiate-level institutions, and IWU didn't become co-educational until 1870.

What may not be well known about our early years is that on October 6, 1851, the first term of our newly founded institution, the possibility of women entering was actually voted on by the Board of Trustees. Only the motion and the vote were recorded by the Board, not the actual debate, but Watson looks to the language used in our first course catalogue for describing "correct mental and moral habits"² required of students and concludes that IWU's 1851 Board worried that men wouldn't behave properly if women were on campus with them.³

The next evidence we have on the topic of women entering IWU are accounts that the all-male faculty finally pushed the issue forward again not once, but twice in 1870. Through a complicated series of procedural wranglings, women were finally admitted that year. What some people may not know about our 1870 date is that IWU was the first Methodist university in Illinois to admit women. So maybe we can forgive the Board for this delay – they were still ahead of their peers.

¹ Ross, 202-03.

² First Annual Catalogue, 19.

³ Watson, 37.

Apparently, there were some regional rivalries at play in the decision to become co-educational. There are several wonderful student-run publications that pre-date the *Argus* – our paper that has been continually published by students since 1894. One of the earlier publications was *The Students' Journal*. In an editorial dated February 1, 1878 the President of Yale University is said to be “one of the recent ardent opposers of co-education...[in one of] those old eastern institutions.” The editors go on to contrast his opposition to “the energy and progress of the west,”⁴ as the reason for our advanced thinking in Illinois.

As is the custom today, this editorial is not signed but one of the assistant editors was a woman named Belle Ryburn, and I like to imagine her contributions to the whole piece, but in particular the following about the progress of women: “We firmly believe that, if in the next fifty years the change is as favorable as it has been in the last fifty, there will be produced many who will not fall *far* below President Porter or any of the honored graduates of Yale.”⁵ Isn't that great? You go, Belle!

Some accounts of the time attribute the interest in women's education to post-Civil War demands for teachers. This was a previously male occupation and educating women, according to one source, would tap into a ready post-war workforce that could be paid less than men.⁶ No doubt enrolling women was a financial benefit to institutions, too.

More of the words of some Wesleyan women will show you that they were aware of their situation at the head of the co-educational line and determined to make the most of it. So yes, 1870 is the late date for our entry to IWU, but when women got going on campus they did not slow down!

Probably some people in this room know which sorority was the first on campus...Kappa Kappa Gamma in 1873. One source for KKG history⁷ says clubs weren't allowed to have their own residences until the 1920s. So I asked myself, where did women live? Like the men, women boarded in the community. The University catalogs of the time say rooms with “respectable families” ranged from \$4-5/week. Rooms alone were \$2/week.⁸

In 1874, an organization called the Women's Education Association (WEA) was formed and they had two specific goals: 1) to endow a professorship for a woman, and 2) to establish a “Christian Home for lady students.”⁹ They began managing the “The Ladies' Boarding Hall” that same year, 1874, and then purchased a building of their own in 1878. It was eventually named Harriett Hall in honor of a benefactor to the organization. A sketch of that Hall is on the table at the back of the room with the other material I brought.

I'd like to point out that the WEA did not discriminate based on sex. Any person could become a member by subscribing 10 dollars. And you could become a lifetime member by pledging

⁴ “Editorial,” 58-59.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Calhoun, “Introduction.”

⁷ “Epsilon,” 10.

⁸ *Fourteenth Annual Catalogue*, 26.

⁹ “Constitution of the Women's Education Association,” Article II, 12.

\$10/year for five years. In today's money \$10 is equivalent to about \$190.¹⁰ This group's purpose was ambitious, and their fundraising needs had to match that ambition!

One of the founders of the WEA was Professor Jennie Willing, the first woman to serve on IWU's faculty. Willing, don't you love that name? She was! She has quite a history before she came to Wesleyan but I don't have time to take you through it all. Let's just say that she was married to an itinerant minister, spoke out publicly about the struggles of that lifestyle, established herself as an activist for women's right to vote, and as a pro-temperance reformist. With a background like that before she was hired, we might estimate the philosophical stances present on the campus at that time, too.

Mrs. Sue M.D. Fry was also an early faculty member, and she has been remembered in our history books as the first matron of the WEA's boarding hall. But her role as an author has been overlooked thus far; her publication titled "Our Girls: How and Where to Educate Them" was reviewed in a 1878 IWU student publication. The review says the point of the book is that "'Girls should be taught not to despise remuneration for labor'...As soon as this lesson is learned, we will have more girls in our universities; girls who are not afraid to work, girls whose domestic learning will not interfere with their intellectual culture."¹¹ You can imagine the assumptions of the time that sparked that argument.

The women faculty members who started with the first women students, including both Willing and Fry, were all in the Humanities. It may interest you to know that it wasn't until 1919 that women science faculty members began teaching on campus. Biology and Chemistry are the two disciplines that broke that ground. I offer that fact for comparison's sake; I won't be taking you that far forward in our history today.

But let's turn our focus now to the early students.

1872 saw the first woman graduate: Hannah I. Shur. She's well-remembered in our history for this feat, but what may not be well known is that she didn't enter the college until her senior year, and she was excused from the standard practice of graduates delivering a Commencement oration. I could find no reason for that decision, but I'll be keeping an eye out for it!

Surely, there's a tradition that any graduate today would be relieved to know passed them by: public speaking as a final test before earning a diploma! And just think of the time it would take for 500 graduates to fulfill this requirement today!

Anyway, Mrs. Shur is known as the first graduate but she was not the first female student to enroll. That distinction belongs to Kate B. Ross. Ms. Ross was a co-founder of KKG, the president of her class and she later became Professor of English Literature and Elocution at both Hedding and Chaddock Colleges in Illinois. Like Mrs. Shur, our records show Ross earned a Bachelor of Science. I wanted to find out something about these women as individuals and scholars.

So I turned to another wonderful publication from the 1870s called *The Alumni Journal* that provides many details of early student life at IWU, including accounts of the then week-long

¹⁰ "Constitution of the Women's Education Association," Article III, 13.

¹¹ "Book Reviews," 48.

Commencement celebrations. As I mentioned, Mrs. Shur did not have to deliver a Commencement oration so none of her words as a student have survived, but Ms. Ross did deliver an address. The quote I read at the beginning of this talk is an excerpt from her graduation oration titled “Moving On,” and the complete text was printed in *The Alumni Journal*.

Mrs. Shur’s ideas were recorded later in our history. She served as a member of the Board of Trustees and was part of the semi-centennial celebration for the University in 1901 where she gave an address titled “The Alumni—Always Indispensable.” With a title like that, she must have been Ann’s kindred spirit of the day!

We don’t have a literal transcription of Shur’s remarks, but a reporter for another publication, *The IWU Magazine*, summarizes her speech by saying Mrs. Shur cited the growing number of college graduates compared to the general population as an indication “that the influences of the school might be extended, that a Carnegie or a Rockefeller might pour into its treasury thousands of dollars, and that prayers from consecrated souls be offered to make its future a power to be felt over the entire land.”¹² I promise I didn’t go looking for these kinds of quotes—I just came across them accidentally!—but her wish for alumni support over 100 years ago shows that fundraising has a long tradition in higher education and our own history!

Early IWU women did not just achieve academically; we have athletics to draw an interesting story from, too.

The 1909 Wesleyana shows statistics and pictures for what it says is first women’s basketball team on campus; however, 1893 is the date we have for the introduction of basket space ball (two words) to Bloomington and guess what? Women at IWU were the first to play.

According to an account dated 1950, basket ball was an experiment in physical education in 1893. A male faculty member at IWU literally wrote for instructions on how to play the game to the man in Massachusetts who invented it. This sport was quite different from what we know today: there was no dribbling and the bottom of the raised basket had to be opened by a cord to release the ball after it was sunk. Women were the first to play in this area because the sport was considered “a sissy game.” The men started playing five years later – that was after it became popular – and they took the sport outdoors.¹³ Presumably, this made it more masculine!

There were other campus-wide groups where women were leaders; these were civic-minded and drew a mixture of members: students, female and male faculty, spouses, and community members.

I’ll close out this talk with a quote from an organization of this type. In 1906 the president of the University asked for help raising funds to improve the campus infrastructure: The Women’s Guild was formed specifically to raise funds for the University as a whole.

They published three issues of a paper during a carnival they ran as their first fundraiser in 1906. A quote from their third issue states: “We feel that the material our contributors have furnished

¹² “Annual Commencement...,” 75.

¹³ Kirkpatrick, “Basketball History.”

will be found to have real literary or historical value and we trust our little papers may be worthy of being carefully laid away and preserved.”¹⁴

So you can probably guess why I like this quote. To someone in my business, these “little papers” are the stuff that dreams are made of. But the people who take the time to record their words and the words of others are the ones that dreams are remembered by. And their beneficiaries are you, the kindred spirits in this room today.

I have only been able to touch briefly on all that I’ve learned about early women’s groups, faculty and students at IWU. It has been a joy to delve more deeply into the documentary evidence concerning early IWU women, and I hope you have experienced some sense of wonder at how timeless their words are. I brought a few of the early records I’ve mentioned here today, but you are all most welcome to visit the archives. All of these collections—your collections—are available for public research. I would be happy to have you explore them more the next time you come to campus.

Thank you!

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