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# The Great Divide of 1890

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*Learning more about an election dispute that drove an IWU class apart also showed the importance of documenting our own lives.*

Story by Associate Professor Meg Miner, University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian

When 21st-century eyes look at pictures of college students in the late 19th century, they appear as dignified, formally dressed and well-mannered people. It is easy to forget they were just as passionate about issues in their time as we are today.

At no time during the decade that I have worked with IWU's historical records has this passion been more evident than in the recently uncovered drama among members of the University's Class of 1890.

This revelation began with a question posed by a volunteer at the McLean County Museum of History who was doing research on one of that class's members. An article she found in the June 1890 Bloomington *Pantagraph* led her to wonder if the Class of 1890 split along gender lines after a woman was elected Senior Class President and whether, because of that split, two separate Commencement ceremonies were held that spring. Mentions of a woman being chosen as head of the class are present in the news, but only briefly noted in *The Pantagraph* and not attributed as the specific cause of the dispute in the other Bloomington paper of that time, *The Daily Leader*.

That inquiry drew me ever deeper into a long-unexplored episode in Illinois Wesleyan history, revealing fascinating details of the era and illustrating how documentary evidence, or the lack of it, can lead anyone with an interest in history down many avenues in a search for the truth. This single request for information influenced classes I worked with last spring as well as a presentation on IWU women's history. It also speaks to The Ames Library's Information Literacy initiative and to the History Department's teaching and learning goals.

The following summarizes some of what I discovered in researching this question.



**After women were admitted into IWU in 1870, students such as Kate B. Ross took leadership roles. However, it appears gender was a factor in the 1890 dispute, inciting male students such as Delmar Darrah (who later became an IWU professor) to hold a separate Commencement ceremony. Pages from an invitation to that event are shown above.**

Returning to the Bloomington newspaper accounts, both mention that “Class Day” exercises were held during Commencement Week. Separate from the University’s traditional Commencement exercise, Class Days were organized by students, and records show they had been held during previous years’ Commencement Weeks. However, the articles state the unusual fact that only part of the graduating class of 1890 participated in that year’s Class Day. Both articles refer to a class leadership dispute that involved a controversy about parliamentary procedure, an aspect of governance that many people find confusing even today.

So who were the members of the Class of 1890? Each *Catalogue of Courses* up until the 1950s published graduates’ names and names of all students enrolled for that year. The graduate record for 1890 is a purely alphabetical list, but it confirms the news account that 15 students received undergraduate degrees, with eight of them being women.

A check of the previous years’ graduate records shows that the Class of 1890 is the first since women were first admitted to the University in 1870 in which women outnumber men in a graduating class. It seemed like an important fact to discover, given the admittedly scant evidence I had found so far that gender had played a role in the split among members of the class.

My curiosity piqued, I began a search of the only known student publication of the time, *The Elite Journal*, which revealed a heated argument in the aftermath of the December 1889 elections for Senior Class President:

**The Senior class met last Tuesday and elected the following officers: Pres., Miss Alice McCoy; Vice-Pres., J. F. Wardle; Sec., Miss May Gooding; Treas., H. S. Watson. They had attempted to perfect an organization, but certain members stubbornly opposed it. In Tuesday’s meeting the affair culminated when Messrs. Nate, Potter, Darrah, Wetzel, and McMahan, not being able to secure the presidency themselves, and being opposed to a young lady for that office, revolted. This faction seemed to forget that there were ladies in the class, and acted in a manner that would have been disgraceful had only gentlemen been present.**

The “faction” mentioned here are known afterwards as the “minority.” While two of the elected majority officers were men, one of them later joined the minority group opposed to Alice McCoy’s presidency. (It should be noted this was not the first time that a woman was elected Class President: records indicate Kate B. Ross in 1874 and Anga Minear in 1880 both held the position.)

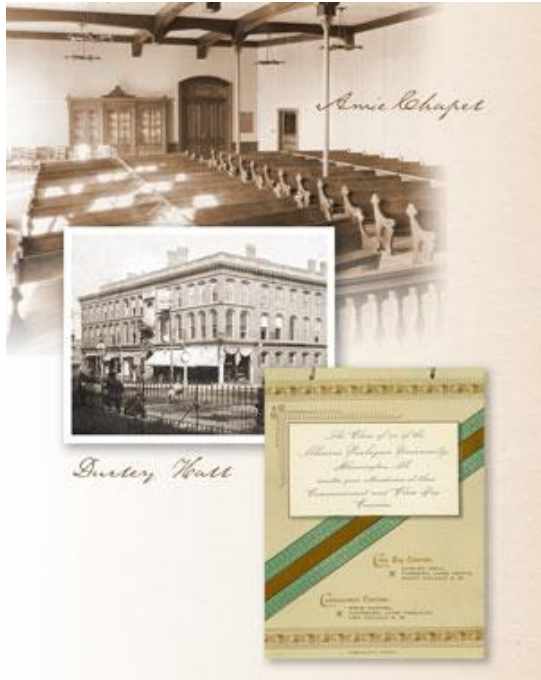
So was gender really at the heart of the split of the Class of 1890? The language in *The Elite Journal* account strongly suggests as much but does not present a clear view of the opposition. Further explorations would be needed to shed light on the matter.

## A contentious election

In January of 1890 — a mere month after the controversial election for Senior Class President that was reported in *The Elite Journal* — a new publication was born. The first issue of *The Athenian* states it is “A Magazine published in the literary interests of the Illinois Wesleyan University and its Greek Letter fraternities.”

While the December election may have been a catalyst for creating *The Athenian*, the new publication’s emphasis on fraternity representation also reflects a response to how writers for the “independent” *Elite Journal* had a history of goading their Greek classmates. In any case, *The Athenian*’s inaugural issue contained a news item that signals the seniors’ class divisions were fully engaged and entrenched: “Both factions of the senior class have petitioned the faculty for the use of tee [*sic*] chapel for Class Day evercises [*sic*], on Tuesday, of Commencement Week. The result is a stand off.”

I attempted to verify this claim in the Faculty Meeting Minutes. Sadly, they are not among our Archives’ holdings. Indeed, the last available meeting records end with the spring semester of 1888, and nothing further is available until fall 1892.



**In 1890, traditional Commencement exercises were held in IWU's Amie Chapel. Senior men chose Durley Hall in downtown Bloomington as the setting for their separate ceremony that included music, oration and a lavish program invitation (above right).**

“Both factions” used their respective publications to continue their escalating war of words. Mostly, accusations occur in the form of unsigned editorials or “Locals” columns, a sort of gossip news section. However, in the third issue of *The Athenian*, senior Ralph F. Potter signs a Letter to the Editor in which he states that a previously anonymous writer for the majority who used the pseudonym “Veritas” is a man (he later reveals this person is Harvey S. Watson, the man who sided with the majority). Additionally, Potter alleges that “[h]is choice of a feminine nom de plume is doubtless due to an ignorance of Latin rather than an accident of birth.” Since I do not know Latin, I consulted IWU Assistant Professor of Ancient History Amy Coles on this usage. Her response included the following observation: “Almost all Roman virtues (including *virtus*, which means manliness) were feminine nouns,” and therefore the “ignorance of Latin” is on Potter’s part, not Watson’s.

It was the constant drumbeat by Potter and anonymous writers in *The Athenian* against Watson’s manliness that eventually convinced me it was Watson’s betrayal of his sex which brought his *fellow* class members’ hostility to full

froth. It is even possible, based on thinly veiled sarcastic commentary, that Potter et al. think Watson joined the majority because of a romantic interest in one of his classmates. But the fact remains that women of the class did outnumber the men, meaning the election results would have been the same regardless of Watson’s position.

So what of the minority’s argument that parliamentary procedures were misused in the December 1890 election?

According to both student newspapers, Illinois Wesleyan’s Law School students mediated a hearing of the sides in April 1890. The judgment went in favor of the majority — that Alice McCoy should have been the Class President — but the males in the minority did not accept the ruling and continued to protest the results.

Did the minority have reason to dispute this ruling? I sought a modern-day judgment from Andrew Shallue, faculty parliamentarian and associate professor of mathematics, who agreed with the law students’ judgment in the majority’s favor. “Reading both the majority and minority opinions, there seems to be no disagreement on the facts. . . . I believe that the actions of the majority were perfectly within procedure.”

## Tone and truth

As part of my library responsibilities, I work with History Department students on identifying research strategies for finding primary sources. It is not enough to find sources and take them on face value, however. Library faculty outcomes for student learning include effectiveness in identifying bias and judging credibility. In addition, the History Department’s learning goals state the importance of “reading, understanding, analyzing, and evaluating texts, particularly within their own historical contexts.”

At the time I was researching the 1890 dispute, Professor Coles asked me to address the issues of authority and bias with her Ancient History class. Dr. Coles and I led the students through a series of exercises to try to discern the “truth” of selected writings and drew parallels between present and past, including some of the 1890 articles. The goal from this work was to

introduce the importance of “plausibility” of a cited incident as a means for understanding the authority of the people who are writing by the way they presented themselves in their writing.

One exercise evaluates “tone,” but when dealing with language from another era it is sometimes difficult to discern. For example, a remark or colloquialism that seems hostile or mean-spirited to a modern reader might have actually been intended as an inside joke or friendly banter.

Student writings concerning the 1890 election controversy display vivid examples of tone. It can be seen in *The Elite Journal*’s sarcastic (but not personally insulting) rejoinders — most anonymous, but some attributed to Watson and classmate Lydia McCoy. An even clearer sense of tone is projected in the personal insults launched by Potter in *The Athenian* and in that paper’s volley of strident editorials, pointed poems and the like. Taken on the whole, these writings provide ample evidence to conclude that members of the minority faction in the 1890 student elections were bitter and angry about the election results in a lasting way.

The growing severity of the tone of this disagreement eventually spurred action on the part of the University’s faculty and Board of Trustees. Board records show that the faculty asked for and received support from the trustees on June 11, 1890 (the day before Commencement) “to exercise an oversight or censorship over all matters intended for insertion in any of the College publications,” a seeming attempt to reign in students’ uncivil tone taken after the senior class election debate.

When classes resumed the following fall, *The Athenian* was gone. *The Elite Journal* editorial that autumn emphasized that the paper always strived to represent the entire institution, “not of a mere faction,” and vowed that “[I]t shall be our purpose to bring about a more kindly feeling among the students, and to establish that which the Wesleyan most needs, a more perfect harmony.”

### An invitation with an agenda

One surprising piece of evidence — in the form of an invitation — provided the firmest evidence yet that dissatisfaction with a male siding with the female majority was the explicit reason for the class’s division.

It was a custom in this period for classes to issue invitations, with varying levels of details, for Commencement Week events. However, no decade among our holdings in the 1800s is complete. We have examples of the style of such class-sponsored promotions for the years 1888, 1889 and 1891 — but not for the year 1890. The University’s custom was to produce small, folded programs for Commencement Week events, and we have a few examples of these — but not for the year 1890.

While satisfying her own curiosity over these missing records, Dr. Coles discovered a reference to that year’s only known surviving Commencement invitation, and in an unlikely place: a catalog entry showed it at The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield. I contacted the staff there, and they made a copy. Strictly from a visual perspective, this class’s invitation stands out from the other 19th-century invitations in our collection: it is the only student-funded announcement printed in color, and it also contains photos of the six men in the minority.

The invitation’s cover page is embossed with the motto “Quit You Like Men., Be Strong.” We can read this as an appeal to the men of 1890 to *acquit*, meaning to conduct themselves, as men would. (Might we infer a desired conduct of loyalty to one’s own sex?) Page two contains photographic portraits of all the members of the minority. Page three announces the Class Day and Commencement exercises on two different days and locations. The program for each day is on the next two pages, and a formal closure on the back cover concludes the impressive effect overall.

Significantly, the invitation’s producers also go to great lengths to literally belittle their classmates. At the bottom of the page listing Commencement activities, in the smallest font size (approximately this size) that is present in the publication, they list the names of the eight women and one man that comprised the majority in the class elections. Only the last names are provided, but the list begins with the title “Misses,” so the majority’s opinion of Watson’s presence in the group is unmistakable.

From the lavish expense of the invitation (noted even in contemporary news accounts) to the purposeful belittling of classmates, it seems the minority felt it had something to prove — perhaps more to themselves than to anyone else. Some were

still boasting three years later when a commemorative publication profiled memorable alumni. Not one of the majority is mentioned, but three of the men from the Class of 1890 receive laudatory reviews; one specifically for his involvement in the “factional fight” of 1890.

It’s possible that the women of 1890 wrote about their experiences, but personal reminiscences are rare in IWU’s archival holdings. Faculty meeting records might hold clues about interventions before the final censorship request, but those books are missing. The newspapers and student publications of the time say the majority members of the class issued their own invitations, but I have been unable to find one.

Consider this an invitation of my own then: Anyone reading this who has ties to the area dating back to the 1890s is asked to look for this alternate invitation. If found, and if it contains pictures of the majority, it would add another dimension to understanding the controversy and also provide an invaluable historical record, as we have only one surviving photo of a woman from the class of 1890. New discoveries such as this happen all the time, and it is always good to welcome them “home” to the University Archives.

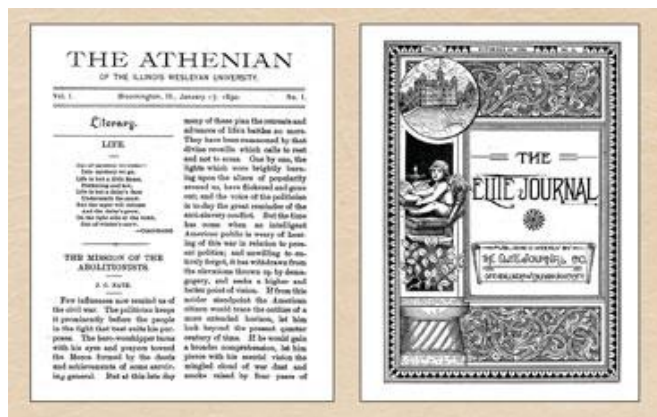
Much of the joy I have in working as IWU’s archivist comes from relating stories about the lives of the people who attended and worked at the University. I have no doubt that the many lessons found in the story of this “great divide” will persist in my work for many years to come. But there’s another important aspect to consider: the need for your help in the changing world of historical preservation today.

My ability to tell stories relies on the texts and memorabilia created and saved by past generations. Without their presence in our Archives, viewpoints are lost. In my role as archivist, I am often immersed in campus life from previous generations, but I frequently think about the person who will be doing my job in the future.

Despite gaps in the records, we are able to piece together a fairly clear picture of the split in the Class of 1890 because those students published their views in a format that can be read 125 years later.

The digital age offers wider opportunities for recording and sharing observations about campus life, but how easily that information will be accessible to future generations is an open question.

Held within password-protected accounts, and in formats that will likely be quickly superseded by the next new invention, evidence of our lives may be lost unless we become mindful of the importance of our contributions. We must all become stewards of our digital memorabilia during our lifetimes. After satisfying needs in our immediate social and familial circles, we



**Student newspapers in 1890 gave different accounts of the dispute that led to the senior class divide. The rhetoric became so acrimonious that faculty eventually intervened.**

must remember there are others who will be interested in some segments of our lives. Cultural heritage institutions — such as libraries, archives and museums — will only be able to carry our history into the future if we make an effort to preserve it.

*About the author:* University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian Meg Miner is the library's liaison to the History Department and School of Nursing and works with all levels of campus governing groups to identify appropriate records retention processes that will satisfy future questions about IWU history.

**For more information about the University Archives (and how to donate materials or to ask questions), [click here](#).**