

Carter Harris (1856-1944)

Carter Harris was born April 15, 1856 on a small plantation in Red Bank, Mississippi. A son of the master and an enslaved mother, Harris was of black, white, and possibly Native American heritage. Despite the disadvantages that came with being the son of a slave, Harris managed to receive a fair amount of education. He held numerous jobs and lived in several different states before settling into a forty-eight-year career at Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University). During his long tenure at ISNU, Harris often said that he had “seen three wars, hoop skirts, carpet baggers, boyish bobs haircuts, the Great Depression, and the New Deal.” Harris also had memories of being a small child during the Civil War and seeing long lines of Union soldiers pass by the plantation he lived on.

Born in Mississippi, he also spent time in Holly Springs, Missouri, Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, and Washington D.C. While in Nashville he worked for a law firm; part of his pay was being able to take classes at Fisk University. He gained sufficient education to obtain a teaching position. During the Reconstruction after the Civil War, Harris left teaching for government appointed positions; first as a postmaster in Memphis, and later as a revenue collector in western Tennessee. When Grover Cleveland was elected President of the United States, Harris found himself out of a government position. He then tried the grocery business, but his venture failed. By the time he took the job at ISNU, Harris had also worked as a tobacco tester, carpenter, painter, paper hanger, and church lecturer. In an interview late in his career, Harris expressed how important receiving a regular paycheck was to him.

Harris had another way of making some money that he continued long after getting his custodial position; catering. It was this enterprise which he and his wife Ida worked on jointly. This allowed him the opportunity of meeting John W. Cook, then president of ISNU. Cook offered him the position of assistant janitor on campus in 1892. At the time, the campus had no sidewalks, no shrubs, and only two buildings; Old Main and North Hall. The next building to be erected, Cook Hall, was to be Harris’s responsibility, and in many ways his home, for the next forty-four years. An 1899 board document shows that he was paid \$480 a year for this position (which in 2018 would be the equivalent of about \$14,500). His wife worked for Professor Metcalf and they supplemented their income through the catering business, sometimes for gatherings as large as 500 people.

When Harris began his career at ISNU, there were about 600 students on campus. It was the kind of situation where everyone knew just about everyone else. Carter spent long hours in Cook Hall keeping it clean and making sure the heat was working. He had an office in the building. And it was there that he acted in his role as unofficial dean of men advising students and, when necessary, correcting their behavior. He often said that a new student to campus would look him up and say that his father had been under his guidance and remembered him as being rather strict. During dances held in Cook Hall, Harris acted as a chaperone. A 1934 *Index* (the ISNU yearbook article) referred to his days acting as a “bouncer” and a 1912 *Index* article stated that at the first dance of the year “Carter Harris was on the lookout for illegal Bloomington boys.”

Harris was witness to the beginning of sports at ISNU. Cook Hall was where games were played for many years before the opening of McCormick Gymnasium. He hung the first baskets in what was more a multi-purpose exercise space than a basketball court.

When games were played, all the equipment, including an actual rowboat that was used for exercise purposes, had to be moved. Harris seldom missed a game of basketball or football. In 1933 he donated a trophy to be given to the most valuable player on the football team.

Harris was a twenty-five-year stockholder and director of the Normal Citizen's Savings and Loan Building Association. He was a frugal man who deposited between ten and twenty-five dollars in the Association every week. During his long tenure at ISNU, he assisted many students with small loans to help them over some rough spots.

He and Ida, whom he married in 1890, made their home at 202 West Locust Street in Normal. They had no children. Ida died in 1910 after they had been married for about 20 years.

Harris retired from ISNU in about 1940 after a forty-eight year career there. During his retirement, he spent much of his time reading as well as playing checkers, and card games such as whist and hearts with friends.

He was in downtown Normal at McReynold's store when he passed away on April 21, 1944. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

In his will he left an estate of about \$13,000 (which would be equivalent to over \$185,000 in 2018). After three and one-half years of litigation, the will was settled; he left the ISNU student loan fund \$2,243.95 (or about \$32,000 in 2018). Smaller amounts were left to the Men's Brotherhood and the Ladies Aid Society of the First Presbyterian Church. In 1963 a new physical plant was built at ISNU and was named after Carter Harris in honor of his dedication to the university and its students.