Edwin C. Hewett (1828-1905)

Edwin C. Hewett was born November 1, 1828 in Worcester County, Massachusetts. He was the first child of Timothy and Lavina Hewett. His family was a member of the Congregationalist Church. One of the core values of the Congregationalists which his parents instilled in him and his brothers and sisters was the value of earning their livelihood by honest labor. Thus, because of his parents’ beliefs, he was subject to earning his own living at a young age and learned the trade of shoemaking by age of thirteen. He was also educated in the common schools where he received his primary education. After being a shoemaker for eight years, Hewett then began to teach taking his first position at the age of 21, making thirteen dollars a month for his efforts. His interest in teaching came from attending an academy when he was a younger man. He then went on to attend the State Normal School in Bridgewater, Massachusetts and graduated in 1852. In 1853 he became an assistant teacher at this school and taught there for four years.

In August of 1857 he married Miss Angeline N. Benton who was also a native of Massachusetts. This union produced two children, Paul who died in infancy and May who lived into adulthood. Charles Hovey, the first president of Illinois State Normal University, was putting together a group of teachers for the new school and somehow had heard of Hewett, probably from others who had been at Bridgewater. Hewett had come to Illinois to marry his first wife, Angeline and thought he saw promise in this near frontier situation. When Hovey offered him a position at $1,200 a year he gladly accepted the offer. So in the fall of 1858 he was officially hired as a professor of history and geography at ISNU.

The first classes offered by ISNU were held in Majors Hall located in downtown Bloomington. Hewett and his wife rented rooms near where he taught. When classes moved to campus, the small family built a house at 202 West Ash Street. They followed Hovey’s advice to build it large enough to house students and collect some rent, as well as provide some much needed living space for students on the tiny campus.

College was quite different during those times than it is now. While Hewett was a history and geography professor he also, at one time or another, taught mathematics, literature, pedagogy (how to teach others), spelling, and psychology. He claimed later in his teaching career that he had probably had every enrolled student in at least one of his classes. He was a man who believed in the “facts” and the “truth.” He was a firm believer in thoroughness and because of this belief; he practiced the exacting method of recitation which he had learned at the Bridgewater Normal School. His methods of teaching would probably be difficult to accept these days. In geography the prime concerns were map drawing and definitions. Students had to learn how to successfully draw, to approximate scale, and where various places on the planet were including important physical features such as rivers and mountains.

In 1876 Hewett was appointed President of the ISNU and served in that capacity until 1890. When Hewett became university president he inherited a job with numerous challenges. Economic problems across the country were making it more difficult for students to afford the luxury of college especially when many of them could find jobs in teaching without any formal training being required. Hewett had his staff attend many teaching workshops to encourage those already in the field to enhance their skills. One of the new president’s first acts was to assemble a display at the Philadelphia Exposition (the first world’s fair held in the United States in 1876 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence) illustrating how his school was training teachers. In order to get it there the students and faculty contributed $108 to pay for the expenses involved. Even enrollment in the model schools was not
adequate for training teachers so Hewett sent around a circular offering a free semester of tuition to parents to find 18 students willing to enroll in these schools. The hard times caused Hewett’s salary to be cut from $3500 to $3150.

One of his final actions as president was that he was responsible for hiring ISNU’s first full-time librarian, Angeline Vernon Milner, in 1890. In 1889, he had been given permission by the Board to combine several libraries of books on campus and hire a full-time librarian. Milner had been recommended to him by Stephen Forbes, the head of the Illinois State Library of Natural History.

Hewett continued to have a very active career even after his presidency ended in 1890. He was treasurer of the National Education Association from 1886-1890 while still President of the Normal School. Upon his retirement he became associate editor of the publication “School and Home Education,” a post he held until the time of his death on March 31, 1905. He was also responsible for founding the University Center, (now called the Normal Literary Center). The University Center was founded in 1896 as part of ISNU’s Extension Movement. Hewett led the group in regular Monday night meetings and once a month, guests were invited and a social hour followed the study period. Hewett was president of this organization from 1897 to 1905.

Hewett also married for a second time after his first wife Angeline died November 21, 1895. He married Mrs. Helen E. Paisley August 31, 1898. His wife Helen survived him by another 18 years and died on March 8, 1923.

Hewett was a very religious man. He was a Baptist with a license to preach and taught Sunday school for many years at the local church. He studied the Bible and theology in great detail and religion was a centerpiece in the Hewett household, both when he was a child and as an adult. For many years he contributed $100 a year for the education of young men to be ministers. It was during his time that a campus YMCA, the fifth such campus organization in the US, was founded. Shortly after, a campus YWCA was founded, the very first in the nation.

Edwin Hewett played a central role in the first three decades of the existence of what is now Illinois State University. He was a man with strong convictions about the importance of education and strong ideas about how things should be taught. His students left him with a clearer appreciation of truth and an intensified desire for living a more noble life. Many students moved on to be teachers in their own right and instilled these same values into their own students. He died on March 31, 1905 and is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2007