

# It Happened At Illinois

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## Forward

Many years ago I started to collect Illini stories especially those having to do with chemists and chemistry. Reproduced here are a selected few that, I believe, convey information or impressions that may have historical value.

## A Chemist's Chemist

Serious accidents that happen in a chemistry laboratory are seldom due to carelessness; chemists are too well trained for that. Usually the cause of such disasters cannot be ascertained with certainty and remain a matter for speculation. Perhaps the most devastating explosion on the Noyes Laboratory records was one that occurred in an analytical laboratory.

It blew the panes out of 35 windows and did much damage internally. The first rumor that spread was that the blast had originated in a vessel in which someone was digesting hay with perchloric acid. After the explosion, however, the hay-perchloric acid "bomb" was found to be intact and the way was left open for wild guesses. One of these laid the blame on organic chemicals whose vapors might have formed an explosive mixture with air in the ventilating system.

Miraculously no one was injured but a senior who was doing a titration had a close call. Reconstruction of events showed that heavy objects including an electron microscope had been sent hurtling past him. Even his buret had been shattered. I can see him now as he emerged clutching the remnant of the buret that had been protected by his hand. His first words were "Damn, there goes my standard solution!"

## House Guest

After Professor Noyes retired, he remained in good health and continued to be active for more than a decade. Right up to the end, he retained his interest in chemistry and chemists. In declining years, however, he suffered noticeable lapses of memory for names. That such a lapse would involve a distinguished foreign visitor was especially unfortunate in view of the Professor's lifelong interest in international affairs.

The visitor was Professor George Barger and the occasion a meeting of the local section of the American Chemical Society. In his introductory speech, Professor Noyes with his usual aplomb began by telling us something about the tricentennial which had just been celebrated by Harvard University. He stated that a highlight of the occasion was the award of the honorary degrees to four distinguished European chemists.

He had no difficulty in recalling for us the names of three of the awardees and continued "The fourth was our speaker of this evening - - -" He turned graciously to our visitor, opened his

mouth but, to our dismay, could utter no name. The awful silence which fell was eventually broken when the Professor said as an apologetic aside "Why, he's been my house guest for three days." He was rescued by the alert speaker who in clear tones spoke his own name "George Barger." Unperturbed, Professor Noyes took over as though nothing had been amiss "Professor George Barger, who will speak to us on - - -"

### Demotion

The atmosphere of our Department, pervaded as it was by a consciousness of high level accomplishment, did not encourage individuals to nurture feelings of superiority. I got my first lesson in humility from no less a person than Professor Noyes himself. I encountered him in the chemistry building, later to bear his name, one Sunday afternoon in October.

It was my first year at Illinois and I had not yet picked up the nearly universal habit of speaking of him as Daddy Noyes. I was elated when the great man spoke to me and seemed to know who I was. He and his small son had been gathering autumn leaves and had stopped at the building on their way home. They were looking for someone who might be able to unlock a certain door for them. When he saw me the Professor was obviously relieved and called out to his son "It's all right. I have found the janitor."

### It's a Wise Child

Noyes Laboratory was named in honor of William Albert Noyes several years before the Professor's death. A simple statement of the event was made at a meeting of the faculty held in Room 100 where he had conducted classes for nearly 20 years. Professor Noyes was able to attend the meeting and to speak at some length about his devotion to the Department and his hopes for its future.

Another honor which came in 1950 after his death was the founding of the William Albert Noyes Annual Lectureship which was established under the auspices of the chemical honorary society, Phi Lambda Upsilon. William Albert Noyes, Jr., appropriately, was the first Noyes Lecturer. As befitted this historic occasion Professor G. L. Clark paid glowing tribute to Noyes, Senior and, prophetically we know now, introduced his son as one fully worthy to follow in his father's footsteps.

We began to wonder if young Noyes could possibly give the superlative performance that his audience was being led to expect. The speaker's response, made with a deadpan poker face, was the following, "I am glad to be introduced as my father's son and not, as sometimes happens, as the son of A.A. Noyes of Caltech who was never married."

### On the House

Back in the early part of the century Illinois Central passenger trains made all the stops. A story that used to be told to all newcomers to the University tells of a passenger who was making his first trip from New Orleans to Chicago. Hearing them call Arcola, then Tuscola, he exclaimed,

"Is this a game? I suppose the next one will be Coca Cola!"  
Answer, "No, Champaign".

### Music to Some

Installation of the chimes at Illinois was done with ostentation, and a feeling of delusion overcame us when its somewhat discordant tones first rang out over the campus. Several generations of Illini had to come and go before the chimes became a part of our cherished traditions. During this process of traditionalization the story about Dean Thomas Arkle Clark and President David Kinley gradually lost savor to become eventually a sacrilege. But it still serves as a thumbnail sketch of those two Illinois greats.

According to the story the Dean and the President were walking across the campus when the newly installed chimes began to play. Dean Clark, who was the type of man to see good in even the most unlikely things, asked "Aren't the chimes beautiful?" The President, unable to understand, could only say "Wh-a-a-at?" Another exchange of shouts only increased the President's irritation. He was a Scotsman and undoubtedly regarded the new chimes as a waste of money as well as a nuisance. He was goaded to say, "Can't hear you for those infernal chimes."

### Trade Tricks

Old time Illini like to recall the days before the Illini Union, before the dormitories, before meals were served by the University. The first thing I did when I reached the campus in 1927 was to look for a place to eat. The place I found was a one-man job, where the cook was also the waiter. I entered and ordered a hot dog. It had hardly been put on the stove when in came a blustering man who had the air of one who gets everything he wants when he wants it.

"Give me a hot dog and step on it", he ordered, "I'm in a hurry."

The second hot dog quickly joined the first and I noticed that it was much larger than mine. I sat there wondering ruefully why I was such a Milk Toast and let more aggressive men get all the good things in life. My feelings can be imagined when I saw that Step-on-it had been served before me. When the waiter finally brought my hot dog he leaned over and said confidentially "There are tricks to all trades: you had to wait but you got the big one."

That this shrewd young man was a student came as no great surprise to me -- a senior in agriculture, he told me. He was the first of hundreds of farm boys whom I was to meet and, as I put it, try to "deagrarify".

When I suggested that the University of Illinois must be pretty good, he wasted no time in acquainting me with the virtues of my new school. Finally, in conclusion, he came out with "No, I wouldn't go to no other school."  
I wondered.

### Bible Belt

During the prohibition era in Champaign-Urbana sin in general went underground. Even at the Men's University Club, bridge was played only behind drawn blinds. The area became known as the Bible Belt. Professor Lybyer of the Department of History was one of the principal proponents of the purity program.

Chemistry too made a contribution: Noyes, Adams, Hopkins, Rose and others were confirmed churchgoers. But fermentation chemistry, at least the production of home brew, also had its addicts. One of these, a graduate student in chemistry, practiced his art in the basement of the house of a married friend who happened to be a history major.

The conspirators, unwisely as it proved, chose Sunday afternoon to "polish off" some beer leftover from a Saturday night party. The beer was soon gone but it had its effect. At this point the chemist volunteered to fetch a bottle of whiskey that he had cached in his room. The married couple thereupon went to the kitchen to squeeze lemons.

Our chemist emerging from the front door was thunderstruck to find himself face to face with Professor and Mrs. Lybyer coming to call. Recovering himself quickly, he said in tones loud enough to reach the kitchen, "Good evening, Professor and Mrs. Lybyer. Come right in". His friends in the kitchen, knowing his penchant for practical jokes, called out "To hell with the Lybyers! Go get the whiskey".

### Professor Hully

Hugh Henry Hully, like many other successful Illini, got a large part of his training at the Farwell. Beer fitted into his research plans in two complementary ways. If an experiment was successful, celebration at the Farwell was in order. Failure brought grief that could be assuaged also at the Farwell.

That certain members of the staff habitually repaired to the same emporium for a coffee-break was perhaps unfortunate. Because of this, I, his research director, would often find him there. On one such occasion I raised my eyebrows as though to reprimand him. But he hastened to confess his error.

"Yes, I know, I know. I'm over here an awful lot. I'm over here so much, in fact, that most people think I'm a Professor."

### Operation Matrimony

As a professor I found that students asked my advice on practically every subject imaginable matrimony included. Also, I soon discovered that the less I knew about the answer, the more glibly I could give it. Getting married, considered by many to be a little questionable for students, became a much more serious problem during the depression of the early thirties. Yet a student chose just that time to ask my advice about it.

I had no trouble marshaling arguments against such a rash proposal. He hadn't finished school, he had no job and small chance of getting one and so on. When he left my office I felt that at least this once I had persuaded a young man to be guided by common sense.

He got married the following weekend!

Among my fellow staff members in my first years at Illinois was one who was notoriously stingy. Reports had it that when he was courting the girl who later became his wife he took her to outdoor band concerts and the like but never to an entertainment that had an admission charge.

One day, my friend Dr. Tightwad came into my office and asked me pointblank, "Is it true that you have been promoted to an assistant professorship?" Taken by surprise, I admitted that he was right and explained that I had been asked to keep the matter confidential for a certain length of time.

His mind always on money, he kept boring in. "What salary will you get"? Reluctantly I gave him the figure \$2,800. Then to my amazement he invited me to his house for dinner. I was still more amazed but somewhat less puzzled to hear him add, "My sister-in-law is visiting us and I'd like to have you meet her."

The moral of this story was put into the form of a rhyme.

"We were all agreed that a Chines Swede  
Could not excite tender emotion.  
But in marriage his hand was much in demand  
When he received a promotion."

### **The Farwell**



The Farwell, across the street from Noyes Laboratory, has been a retreat for chemists longer than anyone can remember. Beer was sold there and gradually the practice was established of celebrating final examinations by beer parties held at the expense of the new Ph.D. When this tradition was at its height, matrimony and pseudo-matrimony visited the Farwell. Not that beer was involved directly but more probably the prosperity that it seemed to bring.

Students noticed the presence of certain gentlemen who seemed to be in competition for the hand of widow Farwell.. Finally bets were made as to who the lucky suitor would be. Chuck Huette, in charge of the soda fountain, seemed to be the best source of information and Matt Miller was delegated to pump him for the low-down we wanted. Imagine Matt's surprise when he learned that Chuck himself was the winner. Mrs. Farwell had become Mrs. Huette less than a week before!

The marriage brought unexpected changes. Chuck was called for military service and his wife joined him at camp. The Farwell was sublet to a Greek and became Nick's Cafe. Nick surprised us by bringing in several waitresses, all past their prime and definitely Toulouse-Lautrec types. One of them, perhaps by contrast, seemed rather nice and we decided that she must be Nick's wife. But we were wrong.

I learned of our error on the bowling alleys in downtown Champaign. A fellow bowler asked if I ever went to Nick's Cafe, saying that Nick was a friend of his. I tried to think of something good about Nick and finally said that he had a nice wife. The bowler looked at me in amazement. "Wife! Why Nick's never been married."

### **Therapy**

One of the better students in my undergraduate course cut class a couple of days then proceeded to fail the next test. When I demanded an explanation he was evasive and shamefaced, but he was incapable of inventing an untrue story. Only after considerable insistence did I bring him to tell me what had happened. My first guess hit the mark -- his girl had quit him. I could hardly blame him for making for the nearest beer joint determined to drown his sorrows. Apparently in his case the old saying that misery loves company held true. He soon found himself exchanging confidences with another boy who also was drowning his sorrows and, remarkably, for the same reason. In fact, not only for the same reason but **for the same girl!** My student had no further trouble with my course.

### **Vacuum**

The somewhat unusual arrangement at Illinois that placed chemistry, biochemistry and chemical engineering in a single department seemed normal to me, perhaps because physiological and industrial chemistry, as they were called originally, had not reached, in 1927, the maturity in the national picture that independent administrative units are expected to have.

Years later when East Chemistry was built the situation had changed so much that it seemed natural for these mushrooming groups to be given the new quarters. This decision may well have encountered opposition from the chemists. All I know is that it was an administrative choice; as usual the responsibility could be placed on the shoulders of Adams only by hearsay, at least as far as I could find out. The wisdom of the decision and the skill with which it was handled reflect great credit on the administration.

Nonetheless, not all of the chemists, of course, accepted this preferential treatment in silence. Their strongest argument was expressed best perhaps by a visiting alumnus. When shown the new building and told that biochemistry occupied the top part and chemical engineering the bottom, he exclaimed "That big building! What in the world is in the middle?"

### **Of a Feather**

Because of losing a bet, a group of my graduate students had to buy me a dinner. They conspired to take me to the Family Tavern, a place of doubtful repute. But as we neared it, in the poorer

part of Champaign their resolution weakened and finally one of them proposed that they desist and pay their debt in a better place. I would not hear of this, declaring that, although I had never been to the Family Tavern, if it was good enough for them it was good enough for me. So we entered the place.

What happened next surprised me as much as it surprised them but I didn't let on. The bartender ran out to meet me with outstretched hand. "Hello Doc, glad to see you!" With equal cordiality I replied, "Hello Fritz, how are you?" Naturally, we were well taken care of.

The amazed students had to wait a little before I explained how it happened that even in the most unlikely places a professor could be among friends. Fritz belonged to my bowling league and we had competed on the alleys the previous evening.

### **Incognito**

One Saturday when I arrived at Noyes Laboratory, I was surprised to find the door locked. An undergraduate who was waiting to get in assured me that he had permission to work in the laboratory that day. Without giving the matter further thought I unlocked the door and let him in, remarking to myself that it was praiseworthy of the young man to work when everybody else had gone home for Christmas vacation.

Later, I learned that the building was indeed officially closed and went to advise the student accordingly. I found him doing a diazotization. Now no organic chemist would interrupt a diazotization, so I told him to go on and complete his experiment, adding that if the campus police came, he was to say that he had my permission to continue. The student looked at me doubtfully and asked, "And who are you?"

### **City's Choice**

The University of Illinois is situated partly in Champaign and partly in Urbana but enjoys high esteem in neither town. Superimposed on the two-way Town and Gown rivalry are intercity differences that sometimes present the University with a problem. When, for example, Champaign voted to try the summer daylight saving plan and conservative Urbana remained on standard time, what should the University do? The fast time was finally chosen, but the big University clock in the tower of Altgeld Hall refused to take sides and all summer long silently registered its protest. Both hands stubbornly noncommittal pointed to twelve and refused to move.

Old timers seemed to remember that when the University was founded it came to Champaign-Urbana as a political plum. Indeed, they recalled that there had been a choice -- they could have the University or the insane asylum that eventually went to Kankakee. Some observers profess to see little difference between the two institutions except that in Kankakee the inmates are not free to roam the streets.

Those who entertain doubts about the sanity of professors can hardly be blamed. Professors are prone to do things that are, to say the least, unusual. And I must confess that I am no exception.

Once in connection with revising a book I needed two unbound copies of it but had only one. To save time I decided to buy a copy and remove the cover.

At the bookstore I asked for a copy of Fuson's Advanced Organic Chemistry, feeling a little strange buying my own book. Was I a member of the faculty? Then I could have the book at 10% discount! I handed the clerk a bill and while I was waiting for my change wondered how hard it would be to get the cover off. Without thinking, I gave it a tug and there I stood with the cover in one hand and the unbound book in the other. Then I saw the clerk cowering behind a pillar!

I had earned a one-way ticket to Kankakee!

### **Segregation**

When I went to Cambridge in 1924, I felt my social shortcomings very keenly. I was still little more than the boy from the farm. That this was true came out in a conversation I had with a Boston lady. She was very nice to me and tried to draw me out of my rustic shell. When I had admitted that Illinois prairies were flat and Minnesota lakes were numerous, she came out with this diagnostic question, "And when you finish your work at Harvard, Mr. Fuson, do plan to stay in the East or to go back to your own people?"

### **Accent**

University communities have always placed a high value on foreign travel and on ability to speak foreign languages. Returning travelers brought back amusing accounts of experiences involving foreign tongues. I was no exception. My story concerned events that occurred on a vaporetto in the Canal Grande in Venice.

Suddenly over the great noise on the deck I heard an American voice ask "How old is your dog?" Then I saw the dog and its master who not understanding could only smile, happy to be the center of attention. The American was one of those who think that they can make English intelligible by shouting. He asked his question repeatedly always raising his voice.

Embarrassed by my countryman's behavior, I translated his question. "Il cane, quanti anni ha"? The Italian then said "Cinque" and held up five fingers. My countryman, still using the shouting technique said "Well, he's a wonderful dog." Turning to me, he thanked me for my help. "It's nothing", I replied, I only know a few words." He looked at me in amazement and exclaimed, "Well, you have a mighty fine accent for what little English you know."

### **Best Policy**

Chemistry in the universities is closely related to the industrial world not only because industrial chemists maintain their ties with the schools in which they were trained but also because professors are retained by the industry. I had the good fortune to serve as a consultant for the Rohm and Haas Company for thirty years (1935-1965) and for this reason traveled to Philadelphia about six times a year.

Chemists of the Company, including not a few Illini, offered me generous hospitality during my evenings in the city. Once a group of them invited me to go with them to Robin Hood Dell to hear one of the summer concerts for which it is famous. Since I had never seen the Dell, I accepted with pleasure. The night before I went to dinner at a friend's house, and what did they have planned for the evening? A concert at the Dell! During the intermission I was introduced to a number of their friends.

When the chemists came the following evening I could see that they looked forward eagerly to introducing me to the Dell. Not to rob them of this small pleasure, I decided to say nothing of the previous night. The program had been changed and all went well until the intermission. Then someone I had met there the night before came up and greeted me with "Why, you come every night, don't you?"  
"-----"

Shakespeare, foreseeing George Washington no doubt, had his rebuttal ready: "It is easier to tell twenty---"

### **Missing Link**

I am fond of telling people that although I taught in two different high schools I was never enrolled in any as a student. The presumption is that in some way not quite clear I did get the equivalent of a high school education. My educational history thus remains a bit mysterious. Even I have uneasy moments over the missing link between the eighth grade and college. When, as often happens in a group conversation, it becomes apparent that the topic under discussion is familiar to everyone except me I ask myself, "Could this be something that they learned in high school?"

When I returned to Wakefield, proud of my brand new Ph.D. degree, a lady asked me what I had been studying for so many years. Learning that it was chemistry, she exclaimed, "Why, I had that in high school!"

### **Displaced Persons**

I have always listed my birthplace as Wakefield, Illinois, but have never felt sure that I was not born elsewhere. My father's case is free of doubt; plans were made for him to be a Wakefield native son, but they were not carried out. My grandfather moved from Flat Rock to Wakefield in 1861 to begin practice as a physician. He, with his wife and baby daughter, left Flat Rock in late September so as to be sure they would be settled in their new home 40 miles away in time to receive the Stork's visit, expected in October.

The new MD's first confinement case did not turn out as expected. He may have known medicine very well, but he did not foresee that heavy rains would flood the Embarrass River (No one could have given it that name with better right than he) and delay his crossing. The Stork found them on the wrong side of the river, so my father's birthplace was not Wakefield but Sumner, Illinois.

When the family finally arrived, they found Wakefield to be a thriving, newly incorporated village. But when new roads were put through according to the survey's map, Wakefield was left nearly a half mile from the public road. The only thing to do was to move the town. So I am able to boast that I was born in a town that lies entirely outside its corporate limits!

### **Human Fly**

To become a legend in one's own lifetime is achieved by few persons. Sidney Ross, a graduate student in analytical chemistry, was one who did; about his name so many stories accumulated that the professional chemical fraternity, Alpha Chi Sigma, of which he was a member set aside one night a year to recount them. Now, some 30 years later, the stories no longer ring quite true. As one undergraduate student put it, "Are these stories really true? They're so funny!"

Sidney looked the part. Fresh from Scotland, he displayed characteristics that, we imagined, betrayed his origin. He parted his hair exactly in the middle and covered it with a derby hat that had no lilt whatever. His pants were held high, much too close to his armpits, by old-fashioned suspenders and of course he carried a cane.

In spite of his foreign appearance he showed great eagerness to learn about American ways and to adopt them. For example, he had a class of students in colloid chemistry which he set about teaching with great enthusiasm. Presently, however, the students began to drop out, one by one. Finally only one of the original ten remained to finish the course. One's thoughts run to extremes. Was this lone survivor the smartest or the dumbest member of the class?

"What grade did you give him?" Sidney was asked.

"Why C, of course. I had to grade on the curve."

Another "Americanism" that misled Sidney was that of owning household pets. When he moved out of the fraternity house and went to live alone in an apartment he soon began to feel lonesome. Friends advised him to buy a cat to share his isolation. As usual he took up the idea eagerly, acquired a kitten and immediately found life less monotonous. But not for long, because the animal soon died.

"But what happened, Sidney? Did it get run over?"

"Oh no, it just died."

"That's strange. What did you feed it?"

"Feed it? Why, I thought they lived on rats and mice."

The American penchant for spending the summer vacation on an automobile trip appealed to Sidney so much that he bought a car. His idea was to explore the Wild West that he had seen so often in the movies. He found a couple of undergraduates who seemed to share his longing for travel but had no car. What could be better? They would form a car pool. Their destinations was to be decided by a daily vote.

At first Sidney seemed to think it was merely coincidence that the vote was two to one with him in the minority. But when eventually he realized that he was in Maine instead of Montana he rebelled. The undergraduates had donned their bathing suits and had swum out to a little rock just off shore and were enjoying the sunshine when anger overcame Sidney. Jumping into his

car, he headed for Urbana, the vote for once being unanimous. His young friends were left with nothing but their bathing suits and their controlling vote.

Later when school had begun in Urbana, Sidney reported these happenings to his fraternity brothers. "I saw them on the campus this morning, but they wouldn't speak to me. How strange! I wish they would--I'd like to know how they got back."

Dropping paper bags filled with water must have struck Sidney as another fascinating custom of this strange new land. But his attempt to put it into practice led to results he little expected. His first error was to choose a bag much too large, his second was to drop it from a place far too high -- a third story window of the fraternity house -- and finally the brothers chosen as victims **were** twice his size.

Whether they suffered any damage other than momentary fright is not of record. What is known is that they stormed up to Sidney's room threatening vengeance. Sidney hurriedly locked his door and threw up a barricade by piling furniture against it. When he became convinced that his improvisations **would not** stop his irate attackers he opened a window and sought to escape by that route. If there had been a tree to provide the possibility of a Tarzan-like descent, Sidney's actions might just possibly have been understandable. But there was no tree -- there was only sheer wall, three stories high.

Although it seems improbable that his pursuers planned to break down the door, when they heard anguished cries for help they had no choice. Even then, they arrived at the window just in time to save Sidney. He was found hanging outside clutching the window sill with his hands, but without the strength to pull himself back into the room.

As soon as the shaken and exhausted practical joker recovered his speech, he was plied with questions.

"Why, for heaven's sake did you climb out of the window? Did you think you could escape down the wall?"

"Yes, I did. You see, last night, I saw a movie called 'The Human Fly'."