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Memories of a Faculty Brat

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Memories of a Faculty Brat

Ralph Townsend '53 writes about what it was like to have the University as a childhood playground.

A recent picture of Depression-era faculty included IWU Professor of Biology Myron Townsend, inspiring his son, Ralph '53, to write the following reminiscences of what it was like to grow up on the Illinois Wesleyan campus. — *Editor*



Myron Townsend carries his daughter Jean on his back during studies in the Adirondacks.

image still gives me shivers. Again, when young, we would scamper up and down the rows in the lecture hall, and scribble on the marvelously wide blackboards with abundant colored chalk.

All my early years (until age 11 or so) I lived essentially in and on the IWU campus — in an old house just south of the Presser Hall music building that was owned by the University. The campus was our gigantic playground. I recall many cowboys-and-Indians games played around the college buildings. We would hide in the window wells at the back of Presser Hall, much to the consternation of the voice majors practicing their scales (it all sounded to us like yodeling), and with an occasional threat from an instrumentalist.

The whole campus was a wonderful collection of nooks and shrubs around the buildings, ideally suited for hide-and-seek or “kick the can.” The sidewalks radiating from Hedding Hall and around the edge of campus were great for biking, and we would zoom along these paths, dodging the students.

Because my father and, later, my mother were in the biology department, I spent lots of time in the Science Building, especially the biology rooms. Of course I shook hands with the skeleton, examined preserved cats and frogs in their formaldehyde smelling tubs, and watched amoebas oozing across the view, paramecia scooting around and rotifers whisking food in, looking like miniature vacuum cleaners. Probably my most impressive sight was a large plaque on the wall of a mounted tapeworm. The

As I grew older, we faculty kids took advantage of admission privileges to the basketball and football games and made a junior cheering section. (Somehow all the ticket-takers knew who we were and passed us through.) I hope the players appreciated our youthful cheers.

I have only a vague memory of Hedding Hall burning when I was young, but recall the shock and despair my folks felt. Somehow, from out of all the rubble, I came into possession of some fire-scorched rocks that supposedly had been collected by Major [John Wesley] Powell during his tenure at IWU. I have always regretted I didn't recognize their significance, and eventually discarded them.

As a biologist interested in small mammals, my father obtained summer positions for several years working for the Roosevelt Wildlife Survey in New York's Adirondack forests and of course took us along. Several summers we stayed in old lakeside hunting lodges and truly had wonderful experiences. I recall catching a porcupine under a tub, swatting at bees and chasing raccoons. Another less pleasant memory is of a cook at one resort wringing chickens' necks for the day's dinner and watching them flop around on the ground. A more pleasant recollection is my father's description of the Side-Hill-Wampus. This was a creature that lived on mountainsides in the Adirondacks. There were two kinds: those that walked to the right around the mountain, so had longer right legs, and those that walked counter and so had longer left legs. I suppose if they ever mated, the offspring were either giraffes or dachshunds! Anyway, it was typical of his humor.

My father spent several summers banding and tracking habits of field mice, so he was always trying to devise a live trap that was raccoon proof. Years later we still had some of these trap boxes around home, but again I didn't have the sense to save some over the years.

I suppose it is no wonder that I grew up regarding the life of a college professor as ideal and so went the same way when I finished graduate school. I majored in math, so I didn't have all the exciting contacts with nature as my parents did, but I do look back on my nearly 40 years in a university (Bowling Green State in Ohio) very happy that I picked that life.