



Fall 2007

### The Case of the Enormous Ficus Elastica

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Steele Brokaw '71, Nancy (2007) "The Case of the Enormous Ficus Elastica," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss3/3>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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# The Case of the Enormous Ficus Elastica . . .

*and other campus myths and mysteries are solved at last.*

**Story by Nancy Steele Brokaw '71**

**Photos by Marc Featherly**

Nancy Steele Brokaw '71 has enjoyed playing the role of armchair sleuth since her childhood days reading Nancy Drew mysteries under the covers with a flashlight. Recently, she set her deductive powers to work, discovering the often surprising origins of dozens of campus landmarks and oddities. Early results of her investigations were revealed in IWU Magazine's Winter 2006 issue. We thought her mystery story deserved a sequel, so here is part two. — *Tim Obermiller, Editor*

## A tall tale

A few years ago, IWU's School of Theatre Arts staged *Little Shop of Horrors*, the campy musical about a huge extraterrestrial plant with an appetite for people. In the lobby of Holmes Hall lives another giant plant — one that shows no signs of evil intent but does look like it could swallow someone in a single gulp.

Call it a University pet.

The rubber tree (*ficus elastica*) spreads 30 feet across the Holmes lobby and up the staircase, where it is tethered to keep its leaves from sprawling over the handrails. A stepladder and ax are required to trim it. Generous sunlight from the building's adjacent courtyard likely spurred the tree's growth.

Campus legend has it that this friendly 1,000-leaved monster began its life as a 69-cent plant from Kmart.

"It's absolutely true, my mother bought it," confirms Lynn Westcot, daughter of Martha and Lloyd Bertholf, who was IWU's president from 1958-68.

"It became sort of a joke," Westcot recalls. "Mother was known for her green thumb. She fussed over that plant and nourished it, same with



**Lynn Westcot displays a photo of her mother, Martha Bertholf, who planted and nurtured the massive rubber tree in Holmes Hall.**

people.”

As for just how big this *ficus elastica* may become, such trees have been known to grow as tall as 60 meters high. Administrators on Holmes’ third floor might start thinking about clearing some space.

#### The man on the mural



**Kami Irvin '07 sits at the Hansen Center information desk. To the left is a photo of Edelbert Rodgers '33. Former Dean of Students Jim Matthews requested the image be included to remember a man whose passage through Illinois Wesleyan was not an easy one.**

Letters for his achievements as a scholar and educator. At the time, he was IWU’s oldest living African American alumnus.

During his visit, Rodgers talked about his life with a group that included Matthews, who recalls the talk as “one of the most powerful experiences I’ve ever had on this campus.” Though the two had met only briefly, Matthews traveled with his family to St. Louis to attend Rodgers’ funeral. “He remains one of the most inspiring people I have met in higher education,” Matthews says.

Born in a shack in rural Mississippi, one of nine children, Rodgers “had a difficult passage through Illinois Wesleyan,” Matthews says. “He didn’t eat on campus, he lived in a black rooming house. He shined shoes on the courthouse square to help pay his way through.”

A large mural hanging behind the front information desk at the Hansen Student Center features nostalgic images, such as 1920s students holding a “Pajama Party” and 1950s-era freshmen wearing beanie caps (an old IWU tradition).

In the same mural is a picture of a tall, slender, elderly, black man. The caption underneath identifies him simply as “Edelbert Rodgers, Class of 1933.” But who was he?

Jim Matthews, associate professor of French, knows the answer. He was dean when the Hansen Center was converted from the former Memorial Gymnasium and officially opened in 2001. Matthews firmly believed that students should lead the project, right down to selecting the choice of furniture and décor. The one exception was Matthews’ request that Rodgers’ portrait be included in the mural.

Just a few months prior to his death at age 92, Rodgers returned to Illinois Wesleyan in 2001 to receive an honorary Doctor of Humane

Rodgers was preparing for a career in engineering when he came to Illinois Wesleyan but switched to sociology after taking classes from IWU Professor Samuel Ratcliffe, who Rodgers described as “kind of a father to me.” After earning a Ph.D. from New York University, Rodgers became a professor and practicing psychologist in Michigan. He also participated in Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 civil-rights march on Washington, D.C. “That was the most exhilarating experience of my life,” he later recalled. “It was almost a spiritual thing. I wouldn’t have missed that for anything.”

“He had a very inspirational story,” Matthews says of Rodgers, “one that should continue to inspire people who pass through the Hansen Student Center.”

### Stone survivors

If you’ve spent much time at Illinois Wesleyan, you’ve likely heard of the spectacular fire on January 9, 1943, that destroyed Hedding Hall. Also known as “Old Main,” the hall was built in 1870 to provide the fledgling University with space for offices, classrooms, laboratories and some room to grow.

After the fire, wartime funding restrictions prohibited construction of a new hall. Instead, a roof was built over the remaining basement walls and Old Main’s original archway, which survived the blaze, was left standing. The structure was dubbed “Duration Hall” and it housed administrative offices “for the duration,” until a new building could be constructed. (An alternative explanation for the name was that it expressed the power of that portion of Hedding Hall to survive the fire.)



**The patio behind the President’s House features benches and stonework made from the remains of Duration Hall.**

In 1960, University administrators moved into the newly constructed Holmes Hall. Duration Hall’s days were numbered. President Lloyd Bertholf watched its bulldozing with a heavy heart. “So much history,” he wrote in his presidential memoir, “resided in those 95-year-old walls — so much of struggle and uncertainty, of faith and perseverance — that it pulled at the heartstrings to see the great stones treated with such disrespect and violence by a mechanical monster.”

After the demolition, “those great stones” of Old Main’s keystone and archway were stored in hope that one day they might serve another use.

That day arrived four decades later when IWU groundskeeper Art Killian — working with assistant foreman Ken Detloff and fellow groundskeeper Adam Radar — designed a patio to go in back of the President’s House. The hall’s great archway was transformed into curved benches and its keystone was placed in the patio’s northwest corner.



“We tweaked the design as we went along,” Killian says. “It took us a summer to build it.”

President Richard F. Wilson and his wife Pat now use the patio for entertaining. “When we tell our guests about the historical significance of the benches,” says Dick Wilson, “we receive many positive comments about the significance of connecting the past with the present and preserving a piece of IWU’s heritage.”

Lloyd Bertholf would be happy to know that Old Main’s great stones are here for the duration.

Portrait of a lady



**Kappa Kappa Gamma chapter founder Kate Ross watches over the women of the Epsilon chapter, including members Reem Abbasi '10 and Lucia Paul '10.**

Susie (Hoose) Jefferson '54 can still rattle off the names of all three founders of Illinois Wesleyan’s Epsilon chapter of Kappa Kappa Gamma. While on phone duty as a young Kappa, she was required to provide the following greeting: “Good afternoon, Susie Hoose speaking. This is Kappa Kappa Gamma, founded in the year of our Lord 1873 by Kate Graves, Kate Ross and Millie Clark.”

Of those three founders, Kate Ross lives on most vividly in the life of the house. For as long as area Kappas can remember, the piercing eyes of her portrait have gazed down from above the fireplace in what was once called the “Blue Room” and is now known as the Cathy Carswell Living Room, named after Cathy (Thompson) Carswell '65.

“Kate B. Ross is the first woman to appear in the University catalogues,” says Ames Library Visiting Archivist and Special Collections Librarian Meg Miner. In fact, Illinois Wesleyan began its policy of admitting women as students in June 1870. IWU President Oliver Munsell was attending the Methodist Central Illinois Conference in Peoria when the measure was approved and wired to his colleagues back in Bloomington: “Open your doors to the ladies.”

Ross proved those ladies were no shrinking violets. In a fiery graduating oration delivered in 1874, she proclaimed, “Eight years ago a political necessity demanded the enfranchisement of the black man. Today, the temperance and other moral reforms demand the enfranchisement of woman.

“Neither today, nor ever, can we forget to be grateful that four years ago the Wesleyan University invited to equal privileges sons and daughters,” said Ross, who was full of optimism on the occasion of her graduation. “The darkness of the past has rolled away,” she declared. “Liberty is dawning.”

Today, the Epsilon KKG chapter which Kate Ross helped found is the oldest Kappa chapter continually in existence. No doubt the lady in the portrait would approve.

### Saving grace

The troop transport ship *Dorchester* had almost reached its destination, an Army base off Greenland's coast, on Feb. 3, 1943. A Methodist minister and IWU alumnus named George Lansing Fox was aboard as were three other chaplains — one Jewish, one Catholic and the other a Dutch Reformed minister.

The four, who had been friends since meeting at Harvard's chaplains school, had volunteered for service during World War II. They were assigned to the *Dorchester*, ministering to servicemen, merchant seamen and civilian workers. Fox — who was 42, a husband and father, and a decorated World War I veteran — was considered the “older brother” of the group.

Tensions ran high as the *Dorchester* sailed through “Torpedo Alley,” where German submarines had been sinking Allied ships at an alarming rate. Around 1 a.m., their worst fears were realized when a torpedo exploded in the *Dorchester*'s midsection. Hundreds were killed instantly or seriously wounded — the rest groped through the darkness as the ship began to tilt and take in water.



**Sunlight gilds the meditation room in the Memorial Center that is dedicated to Fox.**



**The story of the four *Dorchester* chaplains, including Fox, inspired the nation.**

In those critical moments, the panicked survivors received guidance and comfort from the four chaplains, who herded dozens out of the hold and onto the slippery deck, where they handed out life jackets and organized evacuation to lifeboats.

When the jackets ran out, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four of the soldiers. Some of the 230 who watched what happened next from the safety of their lifeboats reported a remarkable scene. The chaplains began to lead those left behind on deck in song and prayer. As the *Dorchester* sank below the chilly waters, the four friends braced themselves against the railings, linked arms and leaned against each other for support. Said one eyewitness, "It was the finest thing I have ever seen this side of heaven."

The story captivated the nation. In 1948, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp honoring Fox and his comrades. A recent book and TV documentary told the inspiring tale of sacrifice to a new generation.

At Illinois Wesleyan, the story is remembered in the Memorial Center's meditation room, dedicated to Fox and to the other IWU students and alumni who died in World War II. The late-afternoon sunlight filters through the small room's stained-glass window, softly illuminating the chaplain's photograph. The face beneath his Army hat portrays strength and kindness in equal measures.

### Romantic surveillance

Students who live in Pfeiffer, a coed residence hall, may be surprised to know the original purpose of four small alcoves located on the first floor.

Pfeiffer was originally built as a women's residence hall in 1949, and the alcoves were made as "date rooms" where residents could entertain gentlemen callers. But privacy was minimal: the rooms were doorless, the hall's directors (often a married couple) dwelled nearby and visiting hours were brief and strictly enforced.



**Teresa Sherman '09 ducks into one of Pfeiffer's "date rooms," which students now use for studying.**

Those wishing to continue romantic conversations via telephone weren't much better off. A tiny room with one phone was built for each floor.

The date rooms now make for handy study coves and the phone rooms store brooms and other custodial tools. But the romance lives on in memories of alumni couples whose courtships were first kindled in those tiny rooms under watchful eyes.

Class bench marks



**Mark Steiner '10 and friend Meghann Baumann use the bookend benches for some serious thinking. The benches were donated by the classes of 1902 and 2002 — or at least that's the official story.**

Opposite a gently curving sidewalk near Stevenson Hall, two benches bookend each other, separated by a few feet and exactly 100 years.

"Class of 2002," engraved on the newer bench, reflects the fact that it was funded by that class. Or was it? According to Lora Nickels '02, who helped organize the 2002 gift, seniors gave donations for a jukebox located in Tommy's Grille in Hansen Student Center, which had just opened.

"The money collected in the jukebox now goes to the annual fund, which makes our gift one that keeps on giving," Nickels says. That great idea was flawed by the fact that money wasn't set aside to keep the jukebox's CD selections updated, so it is now rarely played.

So where did the bench come from? In the end, it was the parents of the Class of 2002 who donated funds to install it.

Less is known about the origins of the older bench, which bears the mark "Class of 1902." A listing of "Traditions and Customs" in the 1918 *Wesleyana* yearbook makes reference to it: "There is a certain white stone bench on our campus which is sacred to Seniors and woe betide any daring underclassman who chooses it for a resting place." A 1920 edition of *The Argus* was



more succinct: “No one but a senior can use the stone bench of campus, not even for purposes of love.”

Times have changed. Now anyone can sit on the bookend benches or play musical selections offered by the Class of 2002’s “other” gift — although woe may betide those choosing a track off the Hansen jukebox’s aging Britney Spears CD, even for purposes of love.

A quote that bears repeating

*“We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility to the great wave of population overspreading the valley of the Mississippi. ...”*

So begins the stirring quotation carved into the Founders’ Gate, built in 1922 to mark the University’s west entrance. Over time, the etched words have become wind-worn and are a little hard to make out. But those seeking clarity need only take a quick walk over to the Ames Library, through its front door and into the John Wesley Powell Rotunda, shown below. If you stand near the life-sized sculpture of Powell (he’s the seated, one-armed gentleman) and look up, you will discover the same quotation stenciled in the circular frieze above. As you turn in circles to read the spiral of sentences, regular pauses are recommended to avoid dizziness.



**The quote from the IWU Founders' Gate is also inscribed in the Ames Library's John Wesley Powell Rotunda.**

The remainder of the quote follows: “Destiny seems to point out this valley as the depository of the great heart of the nation. From this center mighty pulsations for good or evil must in future flow, which shall not only affect the fortunes of the Republic but reach in their influence other and distant nations of the Earth.”



**The Founders' Gate marks the west entrance to the University. The oft-repeated quotation it bears was taken from a Methodist Illinois Conference committee report, according to Illinois Wesleyan historian Elmo Watson.**

Those who attended IWU during the late Minor Myers' presidency likely heard him utter all or part of this quote. Indeed, in his last notable public appearance before undergoing cancer treatment in 2003, Myers made it the focus of his Founders' Day remarks. Referring to the words *From this center, mighty pulsations will flow*, Myers observed, "It is a hope, and it's a prediction of what this University might become. And today, as in the past, our task is to return to those words and discern what those mighty pulsations are, and where they still might lead us."

According to Elmo Watson's official history, *The Illinois Wesleyan Story, 1850-1950*, the quotation originated in a report issued by the Methodist Illinois Conference's education committee. The report notes the church's progress in spreading its higher-educational mission west into "the Valley of the Mississippi," via institutions such as Illinois Wesleyan. Watson's history gives the report's date as 1854, but on the Founders' Gate, the date is given as "Dec. 1, 1850." Whatever date it was written, the quotation's call to destiny remains timeless.