From Illinois Wesleyan
University Library Archives

Mr. Fred Young
Sports Editor
The Daily Pantagraph
Bloomington, Illinois

Dear Sir:

I hope you will pardon my delay in answering your letter. You want to know about the first football team of Illinois Wesleyan University. I helped organize and I played on that team.

I entered the law school of Wesleyan in February, 1887. I had entered the law school of Columbia University, New York, but had been obliged to return home on account of illness. I had played the game and in some way the students found it out. I was passing the college building one day when some of the boys were practicing with a new football. It rolled out my way and I picked it up and returned it with a long drop kick, which was apparently new to them. Anyway, shortly after that time a delegation waited on me and said they understood I knew the gams as played in the east and that they wanted to organize a team at Wesleyan. Prior to that time,' football had been played in the western high-schools and collages with an inflated round rubber ball and the rules, if any, were different at different places. Generally speaking, any number could play on a side, and there was no regular distance between goals or bounds, and the ball was advanced by punting or by kicking while on the ground/ or kicking opponents shins and some times carrying the ball was allowed and some times not without bouncing it in the hand. The game as played then was more like the English game of soccer.

During the seventies, however, the eastern colleges commenced playing the game as now played with eleven men on a side with goals and hounds about as at present, and while changes have been made in the rules and points in scoring from time to time, the game was about the same then as now and the ball used was the oblong pigskin. An inter collegiate association was formed by the eastern colleges and a regular set of rules prescribed and printed in book form edited by Walter Camp of Yale, a well known player, coach and referee of that period. The leading teams in the sport were those of Yale, Harvard and Princeton, the championship was generally decided by a game Thanksgiving Day.

I informed the students that the best way to learn the game would he to get up two elevens and mark off the bounds and erect goal posts, and start playing and I would help them all I could. They did this the following Saturday and as the Normal students also wanted to learn the game a practice game was had on the Normal campus with an eleven from Wesleyan and an eleven from Normal. The two elevens were arranged and played in the regular positions, I acted as referee (the only official under the rules then) and coach and the practice began and soon developed into a regular game, and they learned very rapidly and all seemed to like it.

That was in April 1887, and was the first game played by Wesleyan under inter collegiate association football rules, and I believe it was the first game played between colleges in Illinois.

In the following autumn when college opened a regular team was organized. I have no record of the players and must rely on memory and can only give the best of my recollection as we forget some things in 53 years, so if I am wrong you will have to get some other old grad or look up the Bloomington newspaper files or college papers of October and November of that year. I think Dr. Harry Welsh, who died about five years ago at Lexington, Illinois, and who played on the tear., acted as secretary and treasurer, not an onerous office as we paid out own expenses. He was my room mate, a good consistent player and a splendid fellow. like many other Wesleyan graduates he attained high rank in his profession in after life.

As I recall now the players were Welsh, Smith, Kenward, Whittaker, McConnell, Kays, Beath, Warner, Hopkins, Haynes, Craig, Hanson, Wilcox, Manley (brother of the professor), Hamilton and Martin. There were others to make up a second eleven. The first eleven named above were the regular team or as we called it, the "varsity team". Smith, Kays and Beath lived at Bloomington. Welsh then lived near Heyworth, Hopkins was from Peoria, Wilcox from Minonk, Haynes lived near Taylorville. I don't recall the addresses of the other Wo practiced mostly on vacant lots southeast of the college as there was not muct room among the maples on the old college campus, /we used to make long runs between Bloomington and Normal racing with the street cars (mule drawn); they could go pretty fast down hill. Some of the boys were farmers and some of them worked on farms during the summer vacations,

To keep in condition

plowing corn, pitching hay, harvesting and other farm work done in the old fashioned way before the days of tractors kept them in good physical condition. We were careful of our diet, not to leave anything or. the table but empty plates.

The football suits worn in those days were sweaters and canvas jackets laced in front and knee pants of the same material, a knit cap or heavy shock of hair. The helmets and padded suits of recent years were then unknown.

Beath was center, then called snapper-back. I played, quarter-back and sometimes half-back. Haynes and Smith were half-backs. Warner was full-back (then sometimes called goal guard) and was the only player I ever knew who hurdled an opposing line and make a run. The others were in the line positions. The team was not very heavy, probably did not average over 160 pounds, but were all good runners and became good tacklers. I was captain and called the signals for the plays. Instead of numbers we used such expressions as "play hard", "watch the ball", "play close to the line" and other phrases to call the different plays.

Professor Manley from Harvard had joined the Wesleyan . staff of instructors that fall and practiced some with the team and gave us a good many pointers on tackling. Haynes and I were the only ones who had ever played the game before. Haynes had attended the Michigan University law school.

We played two games with Normal that fall, 1887, on the Normal campus and won both games and played one game in the spring of 1888 when some of our regular players had left college and Normal won. We tried to get games with the University of Illinois and other near by colleges but, as stated

above, they were apparently not playing the game and Chicago University had not then been founded, and Alonzo Stagg had not made his reputation as, coach.

The game had not then attained its present day popularity even with the larger eastern colleges. It was generally played on open grounds, there were no admission charges, and of course, no stadiums and crowds of spectators as at the present big games. In those days we played a faster game, the side having the ball did not go into a huddle before each play.

The first game with Normal was very exciting and aroused a great deal of interest among toe spectators, of whom the majority were rooters for the Normal team. We were pretty evenly matched, the Normal team had the advantage in weight and was just as speedy hut we had had more practice in punting and handling the hall and in interference and general team work. We had worked out and practiced some team plays and a lot of tricks allowable under the rules then in force which cur opponents did not catch on to until too late. By good interference and runs around the ends we had worked the ball down tolerably close to the Normal goal and I made a lucky drop kick between the goal posts, which then counted four points. The point was protested as was claimed that some were off side but the referee finally allowed it, but we wanted to be sure, but no more scores were made until near the close of the last half. A long punt from our side again put the ball in play near the Normal goal and a fumble by one of their halves gave us possession of the ball about on their fifteen yard line. It was getting dark and only a

few more minutes were left to play. The backs, Smith and Keynes, had about played themselves out and had been roughly handled. I called Warner, who was playing full-tack, and told him he just had to get through that line. I called Haynes, the left half-tack, to the line and told Smith to get well out to the right as if to receive a pass. Forward passes were not allowed tut one could pass the tail laterally or backward, and the ball had to be passed to a third r.an from the snapper-tack before being advanced by kick or carrying. The tall was snapped to me, I motioned towards Smith tut passed the tall to Warner who came up on a run., I went through the line ahead of him. The lines had teen playing close together, the Normal left guard and tackle were rather short men. The left end naturally started for Smith, Warner with the ball and a good start jumped clear over the guard and tackle as we all went down, landed on his feet still running and was over the goal line for a touchdown. I kicked a goal from place kick which, with the touchdown, gave us six more points and that was the last of the game.

The next game we played two weeks later we won by a touchdown and goal, six to nothing, as it was counted them. I think there should be more practice with drop and place kicks. I believe it would be possible to develope more accuratcy in making goals after a touchdown and I notice that a good many games are won by the one point making a goal after touchdown.

Football, as its nana implies, was originally a game to to played with the feet, a kicking game. Through the years it has been largely changed to a carrying gan;e. It is hard to say how the first Wesleyan team compared with later ones or with the other college elevens of that day. Some of the members above named played on the Wesleyan eleven in subsequent years with other colleges as the game began to be more generally played and always gave a good account of themselves. It is fair to assume that Wesleyan has improved steadily from the start judging from the splendid record made by this years eleven, although there is a great difference in the teams and individual players of different years. The main thing is a good coach and instructor to direct and supervise the practice of any squad. It is a rough gams, but accidents and injuries are incidental to most athletic pursuits. A good coach car. save his squad from many of them, and gradually develope his players.

The first eleven was composed of those who took an interest in the game and played it purely for sport. Wesleyan was not a large college then but the student body of co-eds made up in quality what they lacked in numbers, they were as fine a 3et of boys and girls as I ever knew, mostly from the farms and small towns of northern and central Illinois, honest, capable and high spirited. It takes some brains even to play football and they were the kind that would attempt anything and generally succeed. The Normal students held a field day to which we were invited and were the first in several of the contests, and as I remember,

made several high records. Bloomington was a fine city of cultured enterprising hospitable people who were kind to the students and took an interest in their undertakings.

This reminiscing nay seers foolish but there are others and I read that a few surviving generals and admirals of our Army and Navy, who have teen long retired for age, are to be honored guests this year at the annual Army and Navy football game between West Point and Annapolis as members of the elevens that played the first game between those schools in 1890, and they have doubtless been interested in the game all the years since.

College athletics properly indulged in makes for better health and more strength and indurance. We never realize until living on borrowed tine how well off we were when able to make the football team. Those were the days we would like to live over; those wonderful days when we were twenty-one.

If this letter comes to the attention of any of the students of Wesleyan of '87 and '88 I would greatly appreciate hearing from them.

Yours very truly,

Galesburg, Illinois
November 29, 1940