

Carter Harris (1856-1944)

Carter Harris was born April 15, 1856 on a small plantation in Red Bank, Mississippi. A son of a plantation owner and an enslaved mother, Harris was of Black, white, and possibly Native American heritage. Despite the disadvantages that came with being the son of an enslaved person, Carter managed to receive a fair amount of education. He held numerous jobs and lived in several different states before settling into a forty-eight year career at ISNU. During his long tenure he often said that he had seen three wars, hoop skirts, carpet baggers, boyish bobs, the Depression, and the New Deal. Harris had memories of being a small child during the Civil War and seeing long lines of Union soldiers pass by the plantation. Most particularly he remembered seeing General Ulysses S. Grant during this time. Harris also loved to tell stories of making the acquaintance of a young telegraph operator nine years his senior named Thomas Edison.

Born in Mississippi, he also spent time in Holly Springs, MO, Memphis, Nashville, TN, and Washington D.C. While in Nashville he worked for a law firm; part of his pay was being able to take classes at Fisk University, a historically Black college. He gained sufficient education to obtain a teaching position. During Reconstruction, Harris left teaching for government appointed positions, first as a postmaster in Memphis and later as a revenue collector in western Tennessee. He was invited to Washington D.C. by President James A. Garfield who offered him an appointment there, but he refused. When Grover Cleveland was elected President of the United States, Harris found himself out of a government position. He tried the grocery business, but his venture failed. By the time he took the job at ISNU he had also worked as a tobacco tester, carpenter, painter, paper hanger and church lecturer. In an interview late in his career, he expressed how important receiving a regular paycheck was to him.

Harris had another way of making some money that he continued long after getting his custodial position: catering. It was this enterprise which he and his wife Ida worked on jointly. This allowed him the opportunity of meeting John W. Cook, then president of ISNU. Cook offered him the position of assistant janitor on campus. This was in 1892, thirty-five years after the school was founded. The campus had no sidewalks, no shrubs and only two buildings, Old Main and North Hall. The next building to be erected, Cook Hall, was to be his responsibility and in many ways his home for the next forty-four years. An 1899 board document shows that he was paid \$480 a year for this position. His wife worked for Professor Metcalf and they supplemented their income through the catering business, sometimes for gatherings as large as 500 people.

When Harris began his career there were about 600 students on campus. It was the kind of situation where everyone knew just about everyone else. Carter spent long hours in Cook Hall keeping it clean and making sure the heat was working. He had an office in the building; it was there that he acted in his role as unofficial dean of men advising students and, when necessary, correcting their behavior. He often said that a new student to campus would look him up and say that his father had been under his tutelage and remembered him as being rather strict. During dances held in Cook Hall, Harris acted as a chaperone. A 1934 *Index* (the ISNU yearbook) article referred to his days acting as a “bouncer” and a 1912 *Index* article stated that at the first dance of the year “Carter Harris was on the lookout for illegal Bloomington boys.”

Harris was witness to the beginning of sports at ISNU. Cook Hall is where games were played for many years before the opening of McCormick Gymnasium. He hung the first baskets in what was more a multi-purpose exercise space than a basketball court. When games were played, all the equipment, including an actual rowboat that was used for exercise purposes, had to be moved. He seldom missed a game of basketball or football. In 1933 he donated a trophy to be given to the most valuable player on the football team. The first winner of the Carter Harris MVP trophy was Paul L. Custer who was later killed in action in New Guinea in 1943.

Harris was a twenty-five year stockholder and director of the Normal Citizen's Savings and Loan Building Association. He was a frugal man who deposited between ten and twenty-five dollars in the Association every week. During his long tenure at ISNU, he assisted many students with small loans to help them over some rough spots.

He married Ida Tait Johnson on November 24, 1889 at the A.M.E. Church in Normal.¹ The couple made their home at 202 West Locust Street in Normal and had no children. Ida died on November 7, 1916 after a short serious illness.² After her death and his retirement, Harris spent much of his time reading as well as playing checkers, whist, and hearts with friends. He retired from ISNU in about 1940 after a forty-eight year career there.

He was in downtown Normal at McReynold's store when he passed away on April 21, 1944. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

In his will he left an estate of about \$13,000. After three and one-half years of litigation, the will was settled; he left the ISNU student loan fund \$2,243.95. Smaller amounts were left to the Men's Brotherhood and the Ladies Aid Society of the First Presbyterian Church. In 1963 a new physical plant was built at ISNU and was named after Carter Harris in honor of his dedication to the university and its students.

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2007

¹ "Normal," *The Pantagraph*, November 26, 1889.

² "Normal Notes," *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 1916; "Ida Harris," Illinois Statewide Death Index 1916-1950 Illinois Regional Archives Depository, <https://apps.ilsos.gov/isavital/idphDeathSearch.do>, Date Accessed January 27, 2022.