

Edwin C. Hewett (1828-1905)

Edwin C. Hewett was born November 1, 1828 in Worcester County, Massachusetts. He was the first child of Timothy and Lavina Hewett. Hewett's father was a farmer, wheelwright, and plow-maker. His family was a frugal, God-fearing household and members of the Congregationalist Church. One of the core values of the Congregationalists, which his parents instilled in him and his brothers and sisters, was the value of earning their livelihood by honest labor. Thus, because of his parents' beliefs, Hewett was subject to earning his own living at a young age and learned the trade of shoemaking by the age of 13. He was also educated in the common schools where he received his primary education.

After being a shoemaker for eight years, Hewett began to teach—taking his first position at the age of 21, making \$13 per month for his efforts (which would be about \$420 in 2018). His interest in teaching came from attending an academy when he was a younger man. He went on to attend the State Normal School in Bridgewater, Massachusetts and graduated in 1852. In 1853, he became an assistant teacher at this school and taught there for four years.

It was during his time at Bridgewater that Hewett became engaged to Angeline Benton of Franklin County, Massachusetts. However, Benton and her family soon moved to Illinois and settled in the town of Sublette in Lee County. Hewett subsequently obtained a new job as the principal of Thomas Grammar School in Worcester, Massachusetts. The larger salary of his position at Thomas Grammar School allowed him to journey to Illinois, where he married Benton on August 23, 1857 in Lee County, Illinois. This union produced two children—Paul, who died in infancy; and May, who lived into adulthood.

Charles Hovey, the first president of Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) in Normal, Illinois, was recruiting teachers for the new school and somehow had heard of Hewett, probably from others who had been at Bridgewater. Having moved to Illinois to marry, when Hovey offered Hewett a position at \$1,200 a year (which would be \$36,363 in 2018), he gladly accepted the offer. In the fall of 1858, he was officially hired as a professor of history and geography at ISNU.

The first classes offered by ISNU were held in Majors Hall located in downtown Bloomington at the corner of East and Front streets. Hewett and his wife rented rooms near where he taught. When classes moved to campus in 1860, upon the competition of the Old Main building, the Hewetts built a house at 202 W. Ash Street. They followed Hovey's advice to build it large enough to house students and collect some rent, as well as provide some much-needed living space for students on the tiny campus.

College was quite different during those times than it is now. While Hewett was a history and geography professor he also, at one time or another, taught mathematics, literature, pedagogy (how to teach others), spelling, and psychology. He claimed later in his teaching career that he probably had every enrolled student in at least one of his classes.

Hewett's classroom was no place to "dawdle." He was a man who believed in the "facts" and the "truth." He strongly encouraged his students to "pay attention and guard against uttering nonsense," and to really think before they speak or act. His pet aversion was "sham." Hewett's sterling character "demanded that people and things should be what they seemed and he practiced his belief in his own life." He was a firm believer in thoroughness, and, because of this belief, he practiced the exacting method of recitation—which he had learned at the Bridgewater Normal School. His methods of teaching would probably be difficult to accept these days. In geography the prime concerns were map drawing and definitions. No student was allowed to

pass his geography class unless he or she “could go to the blackboard and draw freehand, to approximate scale,” any of the continents, and locate countries, states, important cities, and significant physical features, such as rivers, peninsulas, and mountains. Hewett was never out to win popularity contests. Yet, he was held in the highest regard by students, faculty, and the community alike because of his high standards, skills as a teacher, and genuine qualities as a person.

Hewett, like many men of the time, was a known opponent of women’s right to vote. He felt that voting was “essentially an unfeminine act” and that the “hand that casts the ballot must be able to use the musket in its defense. The vote and muscle must go together.” The earliest known instance of Hewett speaking on this subject was March 6, 1868. He presented the lecture “Is it Best for Women to Vote?” (arguing that it was *not* best) at Normal Hall that evening. In his lecture he characterized female orators as “bawling women” (perhaps referring to such renowned female orators as Susan B. Anthony), and that “a marriage must have one person as the head—not a confederacy of two.” The *Pantagraph* reported that his lecture against woman’s suffrage was listened to attentively by a good audience, “a goodly number of whom seemed to appreciate what the speaker said”—though it is not known how many, if any, of the audience were women.

However, a two-part letter to the editor of the *Pantagraph* appeared four days after the lecture, giving a scathing account of Hewett’s views on women’s suffrage. The author of the letters (simply known as S) stated that, “intelligent truth seekers can never be satisfied with a dogmatic assertion” that “voting is essentially an unfeminine act.” According to the author, how can it be that women are allowed to “vote her wish in church...in the literary society, sewing circle, or school,” but not use a similar piece of paper “to deposit in a ballot box where she has a similar opinion and equal interest as a man?” The author ended their scathing summary by complementing Professor Hewett about the stories he told, which were “good—very good.” “They made us laugh twenty years ago, and have had a similar effect...ever since.”

Hewett in turn wrote his own letter to the editor in response to this criticism. On March 17, the *Pantagraph* printed his response defending his position and his opinion. Hewett stated that he had “taken my position on this after long and careful thought, and investigation of both sides of this question.” He further stated that he did “not care to say any more about it, till I find an opponent who can fairly hear, and fairly make, an argument.” It appears, he would get that chance almost exactly two years later.

On Friday, March 18, 1870, Hewett debated renowned suffragist and lecturer Susan B. Anthony at Schroeder’s Opera House in downtown Bloomington. The topic, “Is it best for the women of America that they should vote?”—with Hewett again arguing that it was *not* best. Tickets were 50 cents (which today would be the equivalent of about \$10), with reserved seating costing an extra 25 cents.

Susan B. Anthony was born in Adams, Massachusetts in 1820. From an early age, she was inspired by the Quaker belief that everyone was equal under God, and eventually became an icon of the U.S. women’s suffrage movement. In addition to suffrage, she was an ardent supporter of temperance and abolition.

Throughout much of her life, Anthony traveled the country to give speeches, circulate petitions, and organize women’s rights organizations. When she debated Hewett, she was in the midst of a lecture tour across Illinois, having already delivered suffrage speeches earlier that month in Peoria and Bloomington, among other communities. Several days before her debate with Hewett, the *Pantagraph* noted that Anthony “appears to be an earnest, ardent, conscientious worker for the elevation of woman from the social and political disadvantages under which she

rests.” In a similar article two days before the much-anticipated debate, the *Pantagraph* noted that Hewett was a “gentleman of high talent, and great ability, an independent thinker and a logical debater.” In particular, the *Pantagraph* made a point to report that Hewett was an “honest, conscientious opponent of Woman Suffrage, not from mere prejudice, but from deliberate conviction.”

That evening, the opera house was filled to capacity—every seat, the aisles, galleries, and stage “were occupied by an intelligent and eager audience.” The streetcars “brought crowds of people from Normal,” and the trains from various railroads brought spectators from many adjoining towns.

The debate began following the “ladies first” dictum, and Anthony declared in her opening 25 minutes that women were “treated as minors—and it is always demoralizing to any body[sic] to be treated as a minor or irresponsible being. The laws hold women as little better than slaves. The laws are such and the conditions of society are such that women are compelled to seek marriage as a condition of support and maintenance.” In her opinion, if women were given the right to vote, it would give “her corresponding power for protection.” And that if women had the vote, “long neglected issues involving prison reform and prostitution, among other things, would be given their due.”

When Hewett took the stage in rebuttal, he first announced that he “felt as if he labored under some disadvantages.” He suggested that Anthony had much more opportunity to study the question under debate and that this was “right in the line of her business; whereas he had only the slight preparation which he could snatch from a large school, just at the close of a term, and from a sick family at home.” While there may be some truth to this statement, Hewett had spoken on this topic on several other occasions, and was thus it was not completely foreign to him as he appears to have implied.

Hewett continued on to argue that, “women had enough to do already without the responsibility of voting. Her brain is full, her hands are full and her arms are full.” Plus, women always get what they want—“they rule by an influence that the ballot cannot equal.” Hewett went on to explain that “old oppressive laws, not only in this State, but in others, have been removed upon the demands of the women, and they were changed without the ballot in the hands of the women... Women have shown these laws unjust—men have repealed them—now the law leans to the woman’s side.” In Hewett’s opinion, “there was different work for men and women to do. It was shown in every relation of life, and voting seemed to him to be peculiarly man’s work as was digging ditches, cutting wood, etc...” And, according to Hewett, a large portion of the women of the United States did not want to vote. And because they did not vote, they were “thankfully free from the corrupting influence of politics.”

Anthony retorted by stating that voting was, in fact, not dirty work and that it would not “contaminate women any more to vote with men than to live with them.” And furthermore, that “the women Mr. HEWETT speaks for—those who don’t want to vote, put her in mind of Henry Clay’s sleek, fat, and well-kept slaves, who were perfectly satisfied with their lot in life.”

By all accounts, Hewett and Anthony engaged in a lively, but exceedingly civil, two-hour long debate. Anthony closed the debate by stating that she would rather “run the risk of bad women’s votes” if they would “at least vote for honest work and honest bread.” She polled the ladies in the audience, asking them to vote on whether they wished the right of suffrage. It was reported that the response was “almost unanimous in the affirmative,” with a few women “having the courage to vote that they preferred the present condition of things.” Both speakers were enthusiastically applauded by their friends. But who won the debate? One of the local

newspapers, *The Leader*, reported that the winner of the debate was the promoter of the event, A.D. Ray, “under whose auspices the discussion was gotten up and who pocketed nearly \$200 clear of all expenses” (which would be about \$4,000 today).

Hewett debated Susan B. Anthony two more times while she toured Illinois; on March 31 and April 1, both in Peoria. Again, Hewett took the negative, stating that women should not vote. During these debates, it was reported that Hewett stated he was sorry that it had become “necessary to discuss this subject at all.” And he felt that the question of whether or not women should have the right to vote had been “treated with a great amount of ridicule from the opponents of the proposed scheme,” and that few had ever “treated it with soberness.” While he believed that she was mistaken in her views, Hewett stated that he would treat his opponent fairly, “treat her the same as if a man, grant the same courtesies and expect the same.”

It appears that the follow up debates were not as well received as the one in Bloomington. Susan B. Anthony noted in her diary of 1870 that their audiences in Peoria on March 31 and April 1 were much smaller. She also stated that, “The Prof. no spirit. don't draw fire at all” during their debates. It appears that Hewett did indeed leave this subject behind, as no further evidence can be found that he continued to speak on the topic of woman’s suffrage.

In 1876 Hewett was appointed President of the ISNU and served in that capacity until 1890. When Hewett became university president, he inherited a job with numerous challenges. Economic problems across the country were making it more difficult for students to afford the luxury of college, especially when many of them could find jobs in teaching without any required formal training. Hewett had his staff attend many teaching workshops to encourage those already in the field to enhance their skills. One of the new president’s first acts was to assemble a display at the Philadelphia Exposition (the first world’s fair held in the United States in 1876 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence), illustrating how his school was training teachers. In order to get it there, the students and faculty contributed \$108 to pay for the expenses involved. Even enrollment in the model schools was not adequate for training teachers, so Hewett sent around a circular offering a free semester of tuition to parents in order to find 18 students willing to enroll in the schools. The hard times caused Hewett’s salary to be cut from \$3,500 to \$3,150 (or from about \$82,000 to about \$73,000 in 2018).

One of Hewett’s final actions as president was hiring ISNU’s first full-time librarian, Angeline Vernon Milner, in 1890. In 1889, he had been given permission by the board of directors to combine several libraries of books on campus and hire a full-time librarian. Milner had been recommended to him by Stephen Forbes, the head of the Illinois State Library of Natural History.

Hewett continued to have a very active career even after his presidency ended in 1890. He was treasurer of the National Education Association from 1886-1890, while still president of the Normal School. Upon his retirement he became associate editor of the publication *School and Home Education*, a post he held until the time of his death on March 31, 1905. He was also responsible for founding the University Center (now called the Normal Literary Center). The University Center was founded in 1896 as part of ISNU’s Extension Movement. Hewett led the group in regular Monday night meetings, and once a month guests were invited to a social hour that followed the study period. Hewett was president of this organization from 1897 to 1905.

After over 38 years of marriage, Angeline Hewett died on November 21, 1895 at the home of their daughter Mary Reeder in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. Angeline had gone to stay with Reeder the previous spring, as she had suffered from cancer for many months. Edwin joined his

wife at their daughter's home the last few weeks of her life. Her remains were brought back from Massachusetts that spring, and she was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on May 20, 1896.

Hewett married for a second time on August 31, 1898 to Mrs. Helen E. Paisley. Helen survived Hewett by 18 years, dying of pneumonia on March 8, 1923. She is buried in the Hewett family plot at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Hewett was a very religious man. He was a Baptist with a license to preach, and taught Sunday school for many years at the Baptist Church in Normal. He studied the Bible and theology in great detail, and religion was a centerpiece in the Hewett household—both when he was a child and as an adult. For many years, he contributed \$100 a year for the education of young men to be ministers. It was during his time that a campus YMCA, the fifth such campus organization in the US, was founded. Shortly after, in 1873 a campus YWCA was founded—the very first in the nation.

Edwin Hewett played a central role in the first three decades of what is now Illinois State University. He was a man with strong convictions about the importance of education and firm ideas about how things should be taught. His students left him with a clearer appreciation of truth and an intensified desire to live a more noble life. Many students moved on to be teachers in their own right and instilled these same values into their own students.

On March 31, 1905, Edwin C. Hewett passed away at his home on West Ash Street after a brief illness. Since December of the previous year, Hewett had suffered from heart trouble caused by a severe attack of pneumonia and erysipelas (a potentially serious bacterial infection of the skin), which left his heart in a weakened condition. According to the *Pantagraph*, “even though his condition was known to many, it was hard for them to realize it and the news of his death came as a distinct shock to the community in which he had lived and labored for so many years.” Hewett’s funeral was held the afternoon of April 3 at the Baptist Church in Normal, and he was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington immediately following the service.

Edited By: Candace Summers, 2007 and 2020.