

Henry McCormick (1837-1918)

Henry McCormick was born on February 5, 1837 in Belmullet, County Mayo, Ireland. He spent his boyhood on his family's farm and attended the local grammar school. While McCormick was growing up in Ireland, he survived the Great Potato Famine. Although the Potato Famine originated on America's East Coast, it appeared on the European Continent by 1845 and decimated the potato crops in Ireland in just a few short years. By 1851 Ireland's population had fallen by two million people- half to disease and other conditions brought on by the famine, the other half to immigration and migration.¹ Belmullet was particularly hard struck as the potato was a major crop of the area.

It was in about 1850 when McCormick's father joined the multitudes of desperate people who were emigrating from Ireland to America looking for immediate work and a better life.² In 1853 at the age of 16 it was decided that Henry would join his father in America. According to his great-granddaughter Alice Davis Cates, she stated that his mother sold a cow so he could have transportation money to America. When he arrived on the shores of the United States he was literally penniless because before they arrived, he had given his last coin to a mother with children on the ship.³ Henry traveled to Virginia where his father had gone but upon his arrival, he learned that his father had died a few weeks before Henry arrived in the United States.

After staying in Virginia for about a year, Henry began to move further west. Working on farms, he drifted westward to Ohio where he lived for about two years and then he continued to move further west to the border of Illinois and Wisconsin. Here he worked during the summers and taught school in the winters. In 1859 he began teaching school while boarding in various homes of students' parents. For six years he successfully taught in rural schools in Boone County, Illinois which borders Wisconsin.

On December 15, 1859 Henry married Numanthia B. Kinyon (born August 1, 1839) in Sharron, Wisconsin. They had five children, four boys and a girl, all of whom grew to adulthood and lived successful lives. Henry had a stalwart supporter in his wife. In fact, Henry was often quoted as saying that she had "proved herself to be not only a devoted wife but also one who inspired him to seek the vocation of a teacher."

In 1865 Henry and his family came to McLean County where Henry attended ISNU and graduated in 1868. He later did post-graduate work at Illinois Wesleyan University and received several degrees including a PhD in 1882. Immediately upon graduating in 1868 he became the first principal of the Normal Public School. Before this school was established, children of the area went to school at ISNU's Model School where ISNU students practiced their teaching methods.

In 1869 he became a member of the ISNU faculty and served there until his retirement in 1912. He taught a variety of courses before becoming Professor of Geography and History a few years later. He also served as Vice President of ISNU from 1892 until 1912. He was the institution's only Vice President until 1957.

¹ Mark Wyman. "The Irish as American Industrial Pioneers," *Irish Immigrants in McLean County, Illinois*, edited by Greg Koos. (Bloomington, Illinois: Pantagraph Publishing, 2000) 1

² Wyman, "The Irish as American Industrial Pioneers," 2

³ Reminiscences of Alice Davis Cates, Henry McCormick Vertical File, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

Henry was surely a man of enormous vitality and energy. On campus, he was a member of the Philadelphia Club, gave numerous lectures, and participated in many teachers' institute conferences. He also contributed much educational literature. He wrote over 11 books and papers, including two books on teaching geography and one on women in Illinois. He also wrote several treatises on the value of local history and museums as educational tools including "How the Historical Society and its Collections May Be Made More Useful to the Schools" and "Educational Uses of Local History."

On a personal level, he was a devoted husband and father, had a good sense of humor, and enjoyed telling stories of his youth in Ireland. At the same time, he was proud to be an American. He was said to be a man of "limitless" patience and a friend of students by making himself available to listen to them, give them encouragement, and even to dispense funds from his own pocket.

Early on in his professorship he began his own library of books on geography and history which he made available to his students. His collection grew over the years and upon his death, the family selected 870 volumes to be given to the University per a stipulation in his will. His granddaughter, Grace McCormick, designed a bookplate to be placed in each book to commemorate his generous donation to his alma mater.

His wife Numanthia passed away on December 5, 1905 after a brief illness. So important was Numanthia that in the 1906 edition of *The Index*, ISNU's yearbook, June Rose Colby, a fellow teacher of Henry's, wrote a memoriam about her. In it, Colby extolled Numanthia's virtue, strength, and loyalty. Several years later at her husband's funeral people continued to praise her as a "woman of vision, thoroughly devoted to the home, but who believed that the mind should be trained in order to enjoy the home," which was reprinted in the *ISNU Alumni Quarterly* of August 1918. A favorite saying of Henry's was "True greatness consists in doing each day some little good, not in dreaming of great things to be done by and by," which was probably inspired by his wife whom he greatly admired.

Henry retired in 1912 after serving ISNU faithfully for 43 years. Upon his retirement, individuals and organizations began paying tribute to him for his long service to the institution he loved. One tribute described him as the "Ideal Man" because of his characteristics of being unselfish, humble, peaceable, pure in thought, dutiful, and loyal. Former students wrote glowing remarks about their memories of their beloved professor recalling his now old-fashioned drill method of teaching, and his prompting them with "Going on..."

Henry had been in poor health for over a year before he passed away at his home in Normal on July 17, 1918. While out walking the previous week, he was stricken with a sudden illness of "an acute nature" and fell to the sidewalk, gradually growing worse throughout the course of the week. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

In 1925, the Henry McCormick Gymnasium was opened and it was dedicated in 1930. At that time, it housed two physical education departments, one for men and one for women, and included intramural athletics. A portion of that building is still in use today by the School of Kinesiology and Recreation.