

Aurora College: The Early Years

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April 3, 1912 was an historic day for Aurora College and the city of Aurora. At 9:18 a.m., the eagerly awaited train carrying former Mendota College faculty and sixty-five students pulled into Aurora's Burlington station. Traveling together from Mendota as a group in their own special railroad car, they were met by prominent Aurorans, including Mayor Thomas Sanders, who escorted them in flag-draped automobiles on a tour of the city and then to the campus, where "opening exercises" were held in Eckhart Hall. The mayor, as well as speakers representing Aurora's schools, churches, and businesses, gave speeches of welcome to the newcomers. In response, a representative of the Advent Christian denomination congratulated the citizens of Aurora on their successful campaign to bring the college to their town.¹

Since they could not see into the future, the faculty and students of Aurora College, I suspect, probably did not fully appreciate the symbolism of this occasion which brought town and gown together in celebration of a successful cooperative effort. Although for the next twenty years, the college would be somewhat detached from the Aurora community -- physically located west of town and largely attended by Advent Christians from other towns and states -- the seeds of a much closer college-community relationship had been sown and would start bearing fruit in the 1930s.

The decision to come to Aurora was a good one. Aurora was a dynamic, modern, industrial city of over 30,000 people in 1912. Overall the previous thirty years had been good ones for the city. In that time period, Aurora evolved from a small railroad town that was highly dependent on one industry -- the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad shops -- into a rapidly growing city characterized by physical expansion, a broad industrial base, and an increasing number of cultural, social, and benevolent institutions.

In the late nineteenth century, city and business leaders recognized the importance of diversifying Aurora's industrial base. A secure, economic future, they thought, required this, and it started to develop in the 1880s, continuing up to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Whereas in 1876, the railroad employed around two thousand workers in Aurora, and all the other industries in town combined employed fewer than three hundred persons, by 1900, according to the federal census, Aurora had 4,647 workers laboring in 229 industrial establishments, producing a wide array of goods -- from steel products and machinery to textiles and clothing to watches and vehicles.² Such impressive economic development was good news for Aurora College and was clearly a factor contributing to its decision to relocate in Aurora. The breadth of the business community would prove to be especially important once the college became increasingly dependent on the Aurora / Fox Valley community for its financial viability.

Aurora's industrial opportunities were also important to students and from the very beginning. Evidence culled from oral testimony, college catalogs, and other sources overwhelmingly suggests that the opportunity to find good-paying work was an important factor in bringing students to Aurora College. Almost all of the students worked, and some even worked full time in order to pay their way

through college. Charles Sowder, who attended the college in the 1920s, said that “Aurora at that time was an opportunity school.” When asked what he meant by that, he replied: “You could earn your way through, and there weren’t too many of those schools around.”³ Charles’s experience illustrates his point in that he worked eight hours a day (afternoon and evening), six days a week at the Aurora YMCA. Other students worked in such places as Strathmore and Allsteel. Even the 1913 Aurora College catalog, in a section titled “Opportunities for Self-Help,” suggested that “since the college has been in Aurora the opportunities for work have been abundant.”⁴ The need for students to work was even reflected in the class schedule. Most courses were offered in the morning so that students could work all afternoon. And they did. The campus was a very quiet place on weekday afternoons.⁵

As the automobile parade of April 3, 1912 approached the new Aurora College campus, the view that greeted faculty and students was very different from that of today. The campus was truly in the country. There was no Marseillaise Place, and Calumet Avenue was no more than a dirt road with a sprinkling of houses. In fact, Calumet was the farthest street west until the 1920s, when Randall Road was created. Much of the land east of the campus was empty as well, including the east side of Gladstone Avenue. This lack of development enabled one to look just two blocks east to see the streetcar which came down LeGrande Boulevard, connecting the campus with the rest of the city. South of the campus, on the west side of Calumet, was a cherry orchard from which came the major ingredient for many a dining-hall pie in the 1920s and 1930s. Farther south and west was the very rural Prairie Avenue, aptly named at this time, Students often hiked and picnicked on this scenic country lane.⁶

Although in the country and surrounded by mostly empty land, the Aurora College campus was on the cutting edge of development that would spread westward. That development started in the boom years of the 1920s when a developer started to put in streets. However, this was cut off by the coming of depression so the land lay largely undeveloped until the post – World War II (WW II) period.

The campus may have been isolated in 1912, but the view it commanded was spectacular. The July 1914 *Aurora College Bulletin* describes it like this: “From the college windows may be seen the whole city of Aurora, spread out like a great picture to the east, north, and south of us; while to the west of the buildings is a broad stretch of prairie farm lands, with groves of trees and well-kept buildings to ornament the open panorama.”⁷ Although this rhetoric may have been a bit inflated, the few pictures that we have of the surrounding countryside at this time confirm that the campus was nicely sited.

The campus also looked very different from the way it looks today. For one thing, it was considerably smaller, reaching only as far west as approximately Randall Road. The campus also looked somewhat austere in its early years due to a lack of trees. The huge, graceful shade trees that add so much beauty to the campus today had to be planted in the early years and decades and, of course, took many years to reach maturity. The July 1914 *Aurora College Bulletin* noted that in the two years since the completion of Eckhart Hall, nearly one hundred trees and numerous shrubs had been planted.⁸ Landscaping would continue for years to come.

The campus also looked quite different from today because it had so few buildings on it. For the entire period of 1912 to W.W. II, there were just three, major, college buildings – the women’s dormitory, Davis Hall; the men’s dormitory, Wilkinson Hall; and the focus of the campus, Eckhart Hall, which held all the classrooms, the faculty and administrative offices, the chapel, the library, and even the gymnasium. Eckhart Hall was also arranged quite differently. The library originally was located in the southeastern corner of today’s second floor, where the presidential suite is currently located. When the class of 1931 remodeled the area, transforming it into the Dewing Room, a reading room and a meeting place complete with colonial décor and a fireplace, the library was moved to the space directly above it, on the third floor. The library stacks spread up to the southwest end of the top floor. After the Quonset gymnasium was built in 1947, the library was extended into the old gymnasium space, on the third floor, as well.

The gymnasium was originally located on what is today the third floor. From almost the beginning, it was deemed inadequate by the students. As early as 1921, the *Pharos* made a plea for a new gymnasium. Students wrote: “We found, way back in the ancient history days, a basket ball write-up starting somewhat like this, ‘The team was handicapped by the lack of an adequate gymnasium in which to train.’ Further investigation revealed echoes of this strain coming down through the years, so we realize we are dealing with no novel subject. It has been a constantly felt, and continually expressed need....We are no longer saying ‘if’ but ‘when’.... The Gymnasium is a necessity.”⁹ In another section of this publication, in a grouping of student snapshots, there was a picture of a rather fancy sign anchored in a field that said, “We want a gymnasium!” The caption under the photograph read: “It paid to advertise.”¹⁰ Over the years, the *Pharos* gives evidence of such rumblings about the inadequacies of the school’s undersized gymnasium. It is probably just as well that the students did not know that Aurora College would not get a truly modern gymnasium until 1970, built with money donated by Jack and Alice Thornton, who were students themselves in the 1920s.

The science lecture rooms and the three laboratories – for biology, chemistry, and physics – occupied the entire first floor of Eckhart Hall. Oddly enough although the bulk of the campus lay behind Eckhart Hall, there was no large entrance on its west façade as there is today. There was merely one small door at the south end of Eckhart’s west side. The present-day, much larger entrance was cut in the 1960s, at the expense of some classroom space.

The campus and the buildings on it saw only minor changes in the era before WW II. When Davis Hall and Wilkinson Hall were built in 1911-12, they remained unfinished. Davis Hall’s north side remained an uncompleted, blank wall, which students occasionally scaled to paint their class year on. It was finished and the basement dining hall extended only when Memorial Hall was constructed in the early 1950s. Wilkinson Hall remained only two-thirds completed until 1925, when its south end, which was only a basement housing the campus heating plant, was completed by building over the basement to meet the height of the rest of the building. Finally, in 1926, an isolation hospital was built to quarantine students who had contracted one of the many infectious diseases of the period. Later this tiny, former, three-ward hospital served as the music building for decades until it was torn down to make way for the Institute for Collaboration building. Overall, however, the campus looked pretty much the same, its stable appearance a reflection of its stable, homogeneous student body.

Who were the students who attended Aurora College in the years between 1913 and 1940? Those students who were escorted to campus on April 3, 1912 were representative of the students who would follow in their footsteps for the next two decades. First, they were overwhelmingly Advent Christians, and they came to Aurora College because it was an Advent Christian school. Often it was the case that their families had always expected them to attend Aurora College. The comment made by Alice Thornton (Class of '28) – “I was raised on Aurora College from the time I was born...”--was a common refrain heard from students who attended the college in the early years.¹¹ Second, because most students came from Adventist backgrounds, they generally were not local people (although there were always some Aurorans, both Adventist and non-Adventist). They came from four major areas of the country: New England, the South, the Pacific Coast, and the Midwest.

Having stated this, I now need to make a few qualifications. On the subject of who attended Aurora College and why, the 1910s and 1920s were clearly different from the 1930s. It has often been said that W.W. II was a turning point in the college's history in that after the war the school acquired a larger, more diverse student body that was more likely to have come from the Fox Valley. Essentially that is true. However, I would modify this a bit. World War II did not create this change as much as it consolidated and then accelerated a trend that had begun in the 1930s.

College enrollment records show that the percentage of students residing in Aurora edged upward in the 1920s, but was still no more than about 25% as late as 1927. However, by 1931, the percentage of students from Aurora hit 38% and in 1934 and 1936, an impressive 60%. This percentage dipped in the late 1930s, but was still nearly half. Furthermore these percentages represent something of an undercount because in making these calculations, I only counted those students who were listed as coming from Aurora. A number of other students were listed as residing in Oswego, Yorkville, Geneva, etc., and they may very well have been non-Advent Christian, commuting students also. Further evidence of the growing presence of local, off-campus students appeared with the creation of the Off-Campus Women's Club in 1939.¹²

No doubt this was a development that was bound to happen sooner or later. What made it sooner rather than later was probably the Great Depression. For the most part, college enrollment grew in the 1930s. In fact, in the late 1930s, it leapt from 140 in 1937 to 165 in 1939 and to at least 179 in 1940.¹³ Of course the latter two figures may have had more to do with impending war than the depression. In any case, the figures do not suggest that people were staying away from college. They seem to indicate that Advent Christian students, some of whom probably lived some distance away, were now being joined by local, non-Advent Christians living in the area, who were now attending school closer to home, at least in part perhaps, because of financial considerations due to the Great Depression.

Another characteristic of Aurora College students before WW II that makes them different from today's student body is their age. Today Aurora University's evening classes and many graduate programs ensure that many students are decidedly more mature than the typical college age. However, in the pre-WW II period, as a group, Aurora College students were more likely to be of traditional college age. There clearly were many, fewer, older students than there are today. However, once again, having said this, I need to qualify it.

There was a bit more variability in the ages of Aurora College students than many think. First, there were considerable numbers of students who were younger than college age – the preparatory students. From 1913 until 1930, Aurora College ran what was called the Academy for high school students. Those who graduated from it received the equivalent of a high school degree. Although some Aurorans did attend the Academy, many of its students came from other states. Charles Sowder and his brother, who were from California, attended the Academy in the 1920s. Charles explained that it had been difficult for him and his brother to get into town from the logging camps, where they lived, to attend the local high school, so after President Jenks passed through his Advent Christian home church and talked to his widowed mother, she decided that it would be best to send her boys to Aurora.¹⁴ Other Academy students came for similar reasons. For example, in some rural or small-town areas of the United States, students had access to only a two-year high school. Advent Christian students in the 1910s and 1920s who found themselves in this predicament had an alternative. They could attend Aurora College's Academy. That alternative ended in 1930. By that time opportunities for a high school education had improved to the point where many felt that the Academy was no longer needed.

Some of the regular college students also were not exactly of traditional college age. Because for the most part, Advent Christian students came from families of modest means, some worked a year or more before coming to Aurora College. Adult employees of the college also took courses at and received degrees from the school, adding a more mature presence to the classroom. And there were groups of adult professionals – policemen, business people, teachers, and nurses – who attended special, day classes on campus as early as the 1920s. They were not working for degrees, but taking special courses arranged by their employers or working towards a certificate. Eventually the Evening College was created to accommodate these types of students.

Although Aurora College students of the 1910-30s were considerably different from today's residential students, they both, no doubt, would readily admit that much of the learning that takes place at college happens outside of the classroom. Thus far, I have said nothing about the social and cultural life on campus. What was it like?

Again, although people tend to think of the 1920-30s as a single era, the numbers and variety of clubs on campus in these decades suggest that the 1930s were distinctly different from the 1910s and 1920s. As far as organized activities are concerned, students in the 1910s-20s era had considerably fewer clubs to choose from. However, there were three, long-lasting organizations to come out of the 1910s. The first was the Literary Society, which was founded at Mendota and brought to Aurora. Initially the *Pharos* was published under its auspices, and it sponsored the new students' reception every year, but its biggest job was to provide programs for "Friday Lit." or "Lit Night," as it came to be called by the students. Every Friday evening, the Literary Society put on a program that, as Jack Thornton said, "was a combination of culture plus entertainment."¹⁵ As the years passed, however, the pendulum swung increasingly to the side of entertainment. Outside speakers came, but many of the programs showcased students' talents. Every student working for a degree belonged to the organization. Programs were put on by different clubs, classes, and individuals, and they varied widely in content and quality. In addition to serving up some education and a lot of entertainment for students, the Literary Society did something else for them. As the 1916 *Pharos* points out, "Among the best ways to attain self confidence is to appear before the critical eye of your fellow students upon

this chapel platform and tell them something that you have learned....We are not here to be entertained, we are here for self-development.”¹⁶

The second important club or activity of this era was the *Pharos*. From 1913 to 1930, the *Pharos* was a monthly, student publication, whose June edition, “the *Epitome*,” was the college yearbook. It published campus and alumni news and served as a student literary journal. It is a gold mine of information about life at Aurora College in the 1910s and 1920s.

The third, longstanding organization to come out of the school’s first decade was the Finance Association, which was the predecessor of the Aurora College Students’ Association and the Senate. Each student was charged a small fee at the beginning of each semester (\$2.50 in 1917), which allowed students to participate in any of the school’s organizations. The major job of the Senate was to oversee, allocate, and disperse the funds to the various, official, student clubs. The organization saw a number of changes during the pre – WW II era, but it was an important and enduring student organization that taught students leadership skills.

I mention these organizations, first, because they played an important role in all three of the decades before W.W. II. Each decade, however, produced its own distinctive groups. Two stand out in the 1910s -- the debating clubs and the Prohibition League.

The Men’s and Women’s Debating Clubs, founded at Mendota, were prominent in the 1910s but faded in the 1920s. The Prohibition League was short-lived since prohibition went into effect in 1920, but while it was alive, it was quite visible, especially in 1915. In that year the entire April edition of the *Pharos* was devoted to the issue of prohibition and Aurora College students’ involvement with it. Even the June / college annual issue had numerous articles on the Prohibition League, which, oddly enough, was the only student organization identified or discussed.¹⁷ Prohibition activities took many forms. The school offered a class on the liquor issue, the Prohibition League hosted many oratorical contests whose winners were sent on to compete at the Intercollegiate Prohibition Association at the state and national levels, and in 1915, Aurora College students participated in the city political campaign to make Aurora dry. The “drys” lost the election, but Dr. T. Harley Marsh, pastor of a local church and one of the leaders of the campaign, complimented the students when he noted: “Aurora College has done more to help the opponents of the saloon than any other organization in the city.”¹⁸ In 1917 the Prohibition League, in an attempt to get new members, launched a contest between two teams -- “the Distillers” and “the Brewers.” The team that enrolled the most members was served chicken at the Prohibition League banquet while the losing side was served mush. However, the two sides got strawberry shortcake!¹⁹ Finally, even though prohibition had become a reality, the Aurora College Prohibition League still existed and had a banquet in 1920. Given the titles of the speeches that were given, the concern was with the enforcement of prohibition and world prohibition.

In the 1920s, two types of organizations stand out – regional clubs, and musical organizations. The regional clubs were an important part of campus life for about eight years. The first region of students to organize was New England, in 1917. This is not surprising because New England always sent a substantial contingent of students in these years. They were quickly followed by the Mississippi Valley Club, the Dixie Club, the Pacific Coast Club, and the Canadian Club. Before WW II and especially in the 1920s, a significant number of Advent Christian students came to Aurora College

from Canada, especially the Danville, Quebec area. The clubs were first and foremost social organizations, but also served as college recruiters for the students' home regions. In 1926, however, the *Pharos* announced that "the sectional clubs are dying a natural death.... They served to bind together the small body of students at the time when Aurora College was striving to gain a foot-hold and a larger student body. Now that the former has been secured and the latter is coming surely every year, the sectional clubs can no longer hope to hold their diversified interests.... What we need now are organizations in which persons of similar tastes and natures may come together for mutual education and recreation...."²⁰ The waning of student interest in regional clubs suggests that Aurora College and its students were maturing. They no longer needed the security blanket that the regional clubs represented.

Music played an important role in campus life also. Based on what I've found in the yearbooks, the 1920s were something of a golden age for music lovers. While the 1930s only had the Chapel Choir, the 1920s produced the Music Club, a band, an orchestra, a chorus, and numerous quartettes. Why this ended in the 1930s is unclear. Perhaps it was because of the dire financial situation the school was in during the depression, but I have not found any record to confirm this speculation.

The 1930s saw an explosion of new students groups as earlier student interests faded. Most of them revolved around literary and artistic interests. For example, there were: the first successful foreign language club, the Reading and Creative Writing Clubs, the Daulists (an art club that, I think, helped pave the way for art in the college curriculum), the Drama Club (whose production replaced the tradition of each class putting on a play), and the separation of the *Borealis* from the *Pharos* and its transformation into a weekly, student newspaper.

Not all activities were cultural or literary or even formally organized however. Interviews of former students, college yearbooks, and old photographs suggest that in spite of the heavy workload that most students had, they also found time for a great deal of spontaneous fun. Neither drinking nor dancing was allowed on campus, but many other activities served as adequate substitutes. One of the most popular activities was the early-morning steak fry or weenie roast out in Bliss Woods, or more frequently, about one-fourth mile west of campus. Attending or participating in football games and other sport activities was another very important part of college life, even though the various teams generally did not perform very well, due to an inadequate gymnasium, lack of equipment, and small numbers. The records are also filled with references to parties for all kinds of occasions, especially Halloween and Mardis Gras. These were often affairs in which students and faculty partied together, sometimes in costume, creating their own entertainment. In the early 1930s, Homecoming began, along with the tradition of the parade and the huge bonfire that must have given the Aurora Fire Department much cause for concern.

Needless to say, religion played a very important role in students' lives. Many students walked to the Aurora Advent Christian Church every Sunday morning and evening, where some of them taught Sunday school, preached, and provided music. Then there were short, but nightly, student prayer meetings during the week. The concern for the spiritual side of life was also reflected in such student organizations as the Missionary Club of the 1920s, the Theological Association, and the Students' Christian Association. In short, religion, for the students of this era, was not a once-a-week affair. It was woven into their daily lives.

Having said all this, what conclusions can be drawn about Aurora College and its students in the early years? Living, as we all do, with the problems of modern life, it is tempting, when looking back, to assume that earlier times were better. Of course the temptation has to be resisted because in our more rational moments, we have to acknowledge that all historical eras have had their problems and that so-called golden ages are often more myth than reality. So it is with Aurora's early years.

There are many things from the early years that we have moved beyond and rightfully so. First of all, the early Aurora College was a very paternalistic institution, as were so many other schools of this era. The presidents of this time were viewed as benevolent, yet strict father figures, who had a hand in virtually all aspects of the college. Faculty members were paid, not according to a published salary schedule based on credentials. Instead pay was set individual by individual, and varied according to whether you were a man or women, single or married. While female students had to be in their dormitory by 7:00 on weekdays, the male students had no hours. Second, the early Aurora College constantly struggled to remain financially viable, and, as former college treasurer Orrin Singleterry said about the Great Depression's impact on the school, it "almost snuffed it out."²¹ Third, in spite of growing numbers of Aurorans in the student population by the 1930s, the student body and faculty remained a very homogeneous group. Life at Aurora College did not reflect or even adequately prepare one for the cultural diversity of the larger world. All of this and more can be said on the negative side.

However, much can also be said that is positive. The most obvious positive trait was the sense of community – even family – that existed in the early days of Aurora College. Since the institution was so small, everyone knew everyone else. Faculty generally lived close by, many on Calumet Avenue, and spent a lot of time with students outside of the classroom – in their homes, in the clubs they advised, and even in their social activities. This was especially important for students who could not afford to go home for several years. When students graduated and left Aurora College, they took with them life-long friendships that were constantly reinforced by religious ties – seeing former classmates at church conferences, pastors moving from church to church, etc.

Much of what I've described here is a product of being a small, homogeneous, religious school. Can we as a modern, growing, heterogeneous university learn anything from this aspect of our history? I think so. We can never recreate the kind of community that existed so many years ago. The world has changed too much and so have we. But we can strive to build different kinds of community wherever we can. In the impersonal, mass society in which we all live, where fragmentation, specialization, and bureaucracy constantly work to keep people apart, the need for a sense of community is more imperative than ever. That for me is the most important legacy of Aurora College's early years.



Endnotes

¹ *Aurora Daily Beacon-News*, April 3, 1912.

² Carl Frederick Carlson, *Aurora, Illinois: A Study in Sequent Land Use* (Chicago: By Author, 1940), p. 32 and U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Manufactures, 1900*, vol. VIII, pt. II (Washington: Government Printing Office, n. d.), pp. 178-179.

³ Interview with Charles Sowder, Dowling Park, Florida, 12 November 1991.

⁴ *Aurora College Bulletin* (April 1913), p. 17.

⁵ Interview with Charles Sowder and interview with James Watkins, Dowling Park, Florida, 12 November 1991.

⁶ Interview with Clark Lay, Dowling Park, Florida, 14 November 1991; interview with Orrin Singleterry, Dowling Park, Florida, 12 November 1991; and interview with Charles Sowder.

⁷ *Aurora College Bulletin* (July 1914), pp. 1, 2.

⁸ *Aurora College Bulletin* (July 1914), p. 2.

⁹ *Pharos* (1921), p. 296.

¹⁰ *Pharos* (1921), p. 268.

¹¹ Interview with Alice Thornton, Dowling Park, Florida, 11 November 1991.

¹² *Aurora College Bulletin* (April 1920), pp. 68-71, (July 1931), pp. 56-59, (May 1934), pp. 65-67, (April 1936), pp. 53-55, (March 1937), pp. 52-54, (February 1939), pp. 58-60; *Aurora College Catalog* (April 1927), pp. 67-72; and *Pharos* (1939), p. 56

¹³ *Aurora College Bulletin*, (July 1931), pp. 56-59; (May 1934), pp. 65-67; (April 1936), pp. 53-55; (March 1937), pp. 52-54; (February 1939), pp. 58-60; and (1940).

¹⁴ Interview with Charles Sowder.

¹⁵ Interview with Jack Thornton, Dowling Park, Florida, 11 November 1991.

¹⁶ "Your Duty to the Literary Society," *Pharos* (October 1916), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Pharos* (April 1915) and *Pharos-Epitome* (June 1915).

¹⁸ T. Harley Marsh, as quoted by Leonard T. Richardson, "Aurora College and Local Option: Students Take a Prominent Part in Campaign," *Pharos* (April 1915), p. 124.

¹⁹ "The Prohibition Banquet," *Pharos-Epitome* (June 1917), p. 287.

²⁰ "How Shall We Club?" *Pharos-Epitome* (1926), p. 33.

²¹ Interview with Orrin Singleterry.