

Edwin Bakewell (1812-1901)

Edwin Wells Bakewell was born in Wellsburg, Brooke County, Virginia (today located in West Virginia) on July 20, 1812. He was one of six children born to Samuel and Ann Maria (Bean) Bakewell. On March 17, 1836 he married Julia Ann Parshall in Royal Oak, Oakland County, Michigan. Julia was born on October 25, 1814 in Palmyra, Orange County, New York. She was one of thirteen children born to John and Persis (Hopkins) Parshall.¹ Edwin and his family moved to the town of Normal, (formerly known as North Bloomington) in 1845 where he purchased 360 acres of land.

Edwin and Julia were the parents of six children, three boys and three girls.² One of their sons, Albert Melvin, was the victim of a tragic accident in 1881. He was working in Sibley, Illinois as a teamster and one afternoon while driving his team of horses across the railroad tracks was hit by a train traveling at twenty to thirty miles per hour. His body was thrown a long distance and his head hit a piece of equipment causing instant death. The accident was attributed to train cars being parked on the track obscuring vision and the fact that he was “very deaf” according to newspaper accounts. In his youth, Albert was known for being one of the “crack base ball players” in town.

The incident Edwin would become well known for dealt with the creation of Illinois State Normal University, founded in 1857. The creation of a new school was not an easy task. Other communities were in the hunt and Normal’s proponents had to make sure that prominent citizens were involved in order to make this a success. Many locals made cash subscriptions, most commonly in amounts between twenty-five and two hundred dollars, often to be paid over a two or three year period. As an indication of Bakewell’s status at this time, he donated forty acres of land, the same as Judge David Davis, for the founding of the “Normal” school. This contribution was valued at about \$8000 though some felt that this number was somewhat inflated. It was Edwin’s intention that the donated forty acres would benefit the agricultural department, a point that would become part of a great dispute in later years. Edwin was also an entrepreneur who believed that he could make good money by selling off some of his remaining 320 acres as lots for houses that would inevitably be built around the school

For many years this land was used essentially for nursery purposes. It was rented by Mr. Henry Augustine who used the acreage for the propagation of fruit trees. In 1873 an economic panic spread across the United States. This was largely brought on by the failure of a large financial institution in Philadelphia which was overextended in the railroad industry. Before the panic ended in 1877 one out of four railroads in the country went bankrupt, 18,000 businesses failed, and unemployment reached 14% in 1876. Edwin Bakewell was one of those severely impacted by the economic times. In 1875, nearly two decades after donating it to ISNU, Bakewell wanted his forty acres back. This was the beginning of a court fight that lasted a quarter century until his death and would involve the state courts and the Supreme Court of the United States.

Bakewell, like many of those early contributors, had attached some conditions to his donation. Bakewell’s claim was that the land was donated for the purpose of experimentation in agricultural chemistry and that any proceeds from the land would be used to fund a chair of agriculture.

¹ Ken Christensen. “Bakewell family history,” email correspondence September 6, 2013

² Christensen. “Bakewell family history”

Bakewell claimed that he had signed a subscription paper in regard to donating those 40 acres of land for the teaching of experimental agricultural chemistry.³ However, the bond of deed which Abraham Lincoln had drawn up and Bakewell had signed did not document this stipulation.⁴ The bond of deed only stated that the “institution should be located at or near its present site.” Regardless of the documentation, Bakewell used this argument of ISNU not living up to the agreement to try to regain the property and not only used the courts but the legislature as well. In 1885 a joint resolution was passed that would have allowed the state board of education to deed the land back to Bakewell but they refused and the case headed to the courts. Twenty-five years of legal fighting involved many of the well known lawyers of Bloomington. At times in this battle ISNU feared loss of state funding. School officials were also constantly on the lookout for riders attached to bills that would have returned the land to Bakewell. Officials of the school used all their political clout to ward off these threats.

Toward the end of his life, Bakewell, by contemporary accounts, was completely obsessed with this battle and it became the sole focus of his life. He talked, wrote, and thought about regaining “his” forty acres almost constantly.⁵ Yet, he would go to his grave with this hope unrealized. Edwin died on July 18, 1901 at the home of one of his daughters in Carbondale, Illinois and was then buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois. His wife Julia followed him in death on January 2, 1908.⁶ She is also buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Today, this forty acre plot provides space for University High School, tennis courts, the ISU baseball field, soccer field, a water tower and the Hudelson Building. The Ropp agricultural building appears to be just outside the old Bakewell property. Thousands of people pass this area everyday, unaware of the epic struggle over its ownership.

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³ John W. Cook. *Educational History of Illinois: Growth and Progress in Education Affairs of the State from the Earliest Day to the Present with Portraits and Biographies*. (Chicago: The Henry O. Shepard Company, 1912) 96-97

⁴ William Foote. *Proceedings of the Board of Education of the State of Illinois Held at Springfield, Peoria, & Bloomington A.D. 1857 & 1858*. (Bloomington: Wm. E. Foote, General Book & Job Printer, 1858), “County Subscription,” 30-31, Date Accessed June 30, 2020, Milner Library Illinois State University digitized collection <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1061&context=univpubs>

⁵ Board of Education Proceedings, December 20, 1893, pages 16-19. ISU Digital Collection <https://library.illinoisstate.edu/collections/board-reports/education/index.php>

⁶ “Widow of Famous Claimant is Dead,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 3, 1908