

# That Was *My* Alma Mater

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The days are getting longer. Summer will soon be here. With it will come the 60th June since I walked out of Memorial Stadium with a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology and Second Lieutenant's bars on my shoulders. When the degrees were conferred upon the graduating class that hot Sunday afternoon, we all became instant alumni of the university and the university, our "Alma Mater." Surviving to the 60th anniversary of one's graduation day is a problematic feat. There is no record of how many of the class of 1953 are still with us, most likely fewer than half. And, I am among the very few of that class who later, sixteen years in my case, had the honor of returning to our Alma Mater to serve out our careers.

During the sixteen years I was away, there were some obvious changes in the university campus and students. After I joined the faculty, many changes came so gradually as not to register, whereas the more dramatic changes that occurred were subdued in my mind because of the "mental interference" of trying to meet demanding teaching and research schedules, all the while worrying over how to keep the department afloat during times of rescission. After retiring, I gradually stopped going to campus because my basic academic requirements, library references and journal access, could be realized on line from my office at home. Thus, additional campus changes have "flown under my radar" the past several years.

When I do visit campus, there is time to reflect upon what is and what was. What I now see is different from what I saw when I was a student on campus. When I look at the campus, the buildings and students, my Alma Mater is not what my eyes see, it is what my mind sees. What my eyes see are students walking on campus with plugs attached to an iPod in their ears (although, difficult to discern because of the small size of the plugs), or texting with their thumbs or talking into a smart phone and with their books in backpacks. What my mind sees are students walking and quietly thinking, carrying their books in their arms. It was easy to spot engineering students back then. All carried slide rules, typically referred to as "slipsticks", in an elongated case attached to their belt. With the advent of small sophisticated calculators, the engineer students' "status symbol" disappeared. The engineering students thought they were "going to change the world." And, they did. Today, all students pretty much look the same, irrespective of their major.

The quad looks somewhat similar as it did in 1953. The wide sidewalks (which we called "broadwalks", referring not to the width of the walks, but to the more crude definition of the term commonly used by males at that time for those of the opposite sex) on each side have not changed, nor have the crosswalks, including the one exclusively for bicycles (we were among the first universities to have dedicated bicycle paths on campus). However, the trees are different and smaller than in my time. Back then the "broadwalks" were sheltered by very large American elms that grew on each side, forming a shaded arch over the broadwalks. Several American elms grew within the Quad, itself. The trees formed an aesthetically pleasing shaded Quad. The elms are long gone, victims of Dutch Elm Disease. The elms were replaced by honey locust, which all died a few years after I arrived back. Now, there are a number of species of trees growing along

the broadwalks, but not within the Quad. The university arborists finally realized they should diversify and not put all their “eggs in one basket.” It will be a few more years before these trees reach their full growth.

Most of the buildings surrounding the Quad appear the same as “back then.” On the north end of the Quad, the portico of the Student Union looks the same, but actually is that of an addition to the building that almost replicates the original building. On the south end of the Quad, the Auditorium has been enlarged in the back. The north side, facing the Quad, is little changed. As I look at the front steps, an autumn evening scene comes into focus. It is of a pep rally, as was held before each home football game. The “Second Regimental Band” is on the steps, in front of a crowd of a thousand or more students congregated on the Quad. From the east-west streets come marching columns of pledges of fraternities, each carrying a torch and chanting, “Whose Street? \_\_\_\_\_ Street!”, with the name of their street inserted. The torches are thrown into a pile on the concrete apron in front of the Auditorium, forming a large bonfire. The band plays school songs, the cheerleaders lead the crowd in cheers and coach Eliot and a football player or two give a short pep talk. My roommate, Roy, and I made it a point to be up front at the rallies. There no longer is a pep rally in front of the Auditorium the night before home games.

The Auditorium, itself, holds special memories for me. Both my academic and military careers began in the Auditorium. In September 1949, the night before freshman registration began, the incoming class gathered here to be welcomed to the University by President Stoddard and other administrators. This was the start of an academic career that spanned 48 years. Four years later, in June 1953, I received my Army commission in the Auditorium, the beginning of a 30-year Army career. In May 1997 I gave the last lecture of my career, in the very same Auditorium in which both of my careers began. Because of this coincidence, that lecture was especially emotional for me. How many of us end our careers in the very room in which they began?

Then, there is the statue of our “Alma Mater”, the iconic image of the university and a backdrop for graduation photos of students decked out in caps and gowns. In 1953, the statue was located on the south side of the Auditorium, isolated from visitors to campus and from the students as they went to and from classes on the Quad. The statue now is located centrally, on the main sidewalk leading from campus town to the Quad. Here, the statue is more visible to visitors to campus and to the students, as well as more accessible for photographs at commencement time. This is a much more appropriate location, which begs the question, why was it originally placed in such an isolated location as behind the Auditorium?

As I wander around the Quad, the memories flow back. The front steps of Noyes Lab--trudging up the steps to an 8:00 AM organic chemistry lecture, counting the hours until I could go to bed again. I was constantly sleep-deprived from studying late into the night. Harker Hall, east of the Student Union looks about the same. This is where I took Entomology courses, which almost caused me to change my major to Entomology. But, I remained in Zoology and became a Mammalogist. Only the outer shell of Harker Hall remains the same. The inside was gutted and completely rebuilt for offices of the University Foundation. Behind Harker Hall is the Natural History Building where I took my Zoology courses, beginning with General Zoology the fall of 1949. I always wondered what had become of the girl who sat beside me in the Zoology lecture. One of the guys in my house was trying to date her and sent notes for her with me asking her for

a date (do not remember why he simply did not call her). She always turned him down. I kept hoping she might say, "Speak for yourself, John." She never did. A few years ago I located her through the internet. We now keep in touch via e-mail.

On the other side of the Quad, to the southwest of the Alma Mater statue, Altgeld Hall looks exactly the same as when I was a student. It now houses the Math department. "Back then" it was home to the Law School. I still have an image of the noontime preoccupation of the law students, congregating in front of the north steps and "pitching pennies" (the one whose penny was the closest to the base of the bottom step, won all the pennies "pitched" each time). Once they graduated, the lawyers pitched more than pennies at lunch, and realized more money.

Further south, the English Building also looks the same as it did, but the name is new. When I was a student, it was the women's building, housing Home Economics and Physical Education, complete with a swimming pool. And, it was called, Bevier Hall, which the male students pronounced, "Brassiere Hall." The more commonly used name for that piece of women's apparel had not yet become, "bra." The "new" women's building southeast of the Quad now carries the name "Bevier Hall." The English Department occupies the old Bevier Hall, thus the name change. The two other buildings to the south of the English Building, Lincoln Hall and Gregory Hall, still look the same from the outside. I have the vision of the long wooden ramp for wheel chair-bound students extending from the top of the steps of Lincoln Hall to the west broadwalk (the university was the first to provide wheel-chair access to most buildings so as to accommodate the large number of disabled World War II veterans). I still see the men tilting their chairs up on the hind wheels and zipping down to the broadwalk.

There is little of Campus Town that is the same. From the outside, the building on the southwest corner of Wright and Green Streets looks the same. But, it is now a bank. When I was an undergraduate, the building housed the U of I Drugs, complete with a luncheon counter. Four of us would stop there for cokes after the General Zoology lecture. The other three were premed. Never knew what became of them. It is interesting that what goes around comes around. The U of I Drugs building formerly had been a bank that "crashed" during the depression. Where my house, "The Mansion", stood on Green Street, then three blocks from Campus Town, is now a part of Campus Town itself. Continuous store facades front restaurants and other businesses for five blocks down Green Street. An art co-op and Mexican restaurant occupy the space of our three-story house.

There were a number of activities that were part of our time on campus. Homecoming displays at each organized house were most elaborate in the early 1950s. The displays in front of houses with a several engineering students available to design the displays were exceptionally complicated. Many utilized motor-driven and other moving parts to stress the theme of the display. Such homecoming displays that are erected these days are much more modest. In place of elaborate displays, there is a long Homecoming Parade the afternoon before the football game.

Each spring the fraternities, sororities and organized independent houses put on a Spring Carnival in the Armory to support the Campus Chest. During the class breaks the week before the Carnival, many of the groups would put on brief skits in the streets adjacent to campus to advertise their show. The shows were very imaginative and well performed. There is no Spring

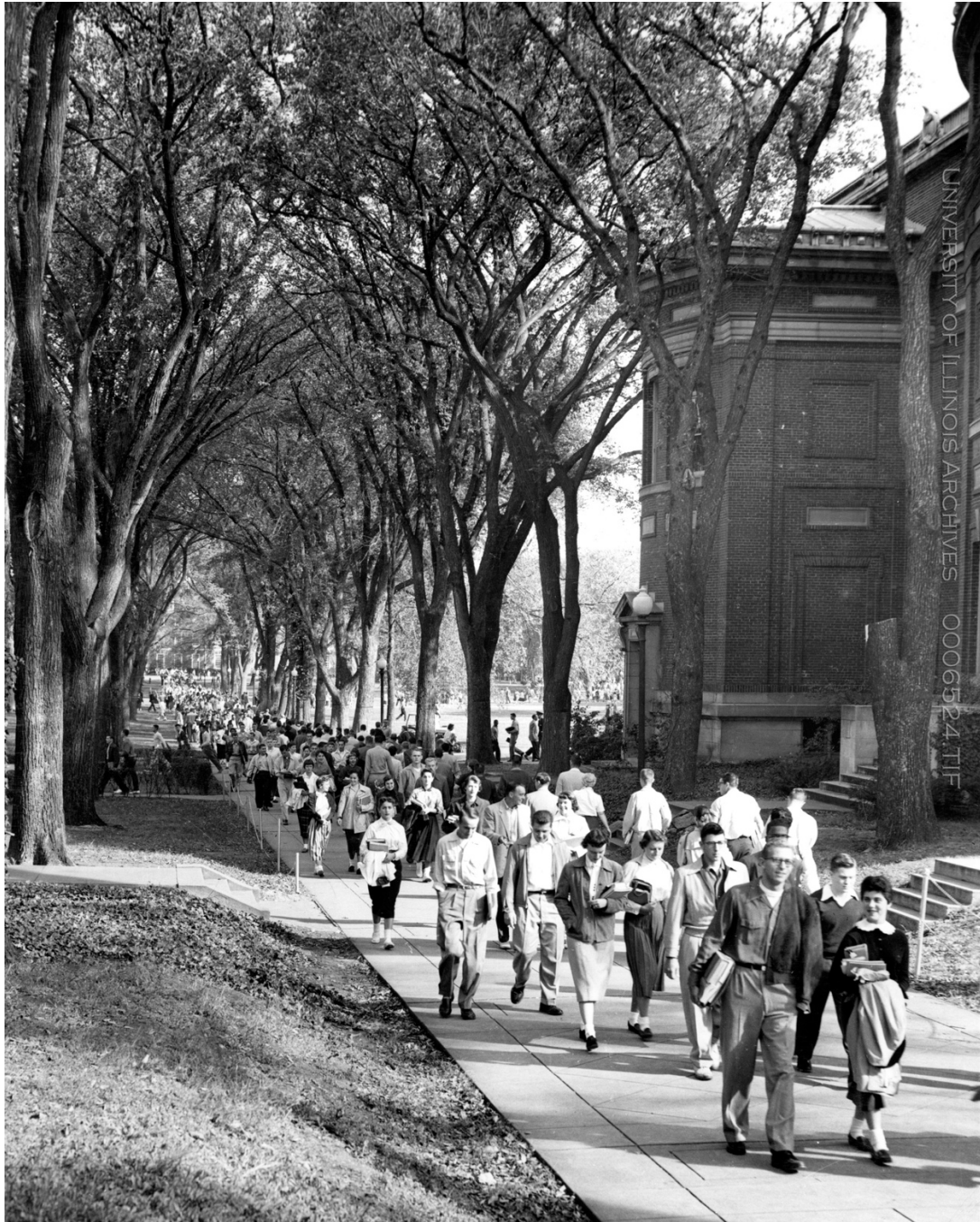
Carnival now. Instead, there is an Unofficial St. Patrick's Day event, the primary purpose of which seems to be an excuse to get drunk.

During the early 1950s the military draft was still in place and there was a war in Korea. Almost all draft-eligible males (the large number of World War II veterans on campus obviously were exempt) were enrolled in ROTC, the first two years of which were required of all males. Most juniors and seniors were also enrolled so as to obtain a commission before going on active duty. Thus, the military had a large presence, around 8,000 strong, on campus. Each May one Saturday, "Mothers' Day/Honors Day", was set aside to honor our mothers and the academic achievements of the students. The highlight of the afternoon was a parade by the ROTC. Honors Day has been dropped from what is now simply "Moms Weekend." Now that there is no draft, the ROTC has a very small presence on campus. There is no parade on Moms Weekend.

Three campus-wide dances, the Panhellenic Ball, Military Ball and Senior Ball, were big events in those days, each bringing in one of the "Big Bands" of the era. The dances on campus are much smaller these days and any resemblance between the dress of the participants and the manner of dancing in our day and of today's students, is purely accidental.

Even with all the changes, there are the many familiarities of my past. As the current students walk the broadwalks, or whatever they call them, there most likely is no thought (as we did not, either) of what changes will have taken place when they return for the 60th anniversary of their graduation. And, most will survive that long, thanks in part to the premeds of their day. Today's students will be amazed, as am I, at the changes in the students and campus buildings, but even more so in what still looks the same. The returning students will reflect back to the campus of their day, as I reflect back to the campus of my time. What my eyes now see is the campus of 2013, their Alma Mater. What my mind "sees", is the campus of 1953, for that was my Alma Mater, the University of Illinois.

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**Fig 1. Looking north along the west broadwalk, from the southwest side of the Auditorium, 1950, when the American Elms were full sized. Crowns of the elms form a high shaded arch over the broadwalk. Note that the women are wearing dresses and all students are carrying their books in their hands. (University of Illinois Archives)**

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**Fig. 2. The Quad in 1948. The American elm trees provide shade over the broadwalks and over much of the Quad. (Pontiac Photo, Chicago IL.)**

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**Fig. 3. Another view of the elm-shaded Quad, Registration 1953. Note the American elms within the Quad itself. (Champaign News Gazette)**

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**Fig. 4. View of the Quad, looking south, 2009. The trees along the broadwalks have not yet reached full growth. Note also the lack of trees within the Quad, itself. In the background, the front of the Auditorium. In the 1940s and early 1950s a pep rally was held on the front steps of the Auditorium the night before each home game. The author began and ended his academic career within the Auditorium.**

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**Fig. 5. Front steps of Noyes Lab, little changed since 1949.**

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**Fig. 6. The wooden wheelchair ramp leading from Lincoln Hall to the west broadwalk, 1952. The University of Illinois was the first university to provide wheelchair access for disabled World War II veterans. (University of Illinois Archives)**

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Purdue

I go Paps

# Homecoming

Illini rules  
Hatsell!



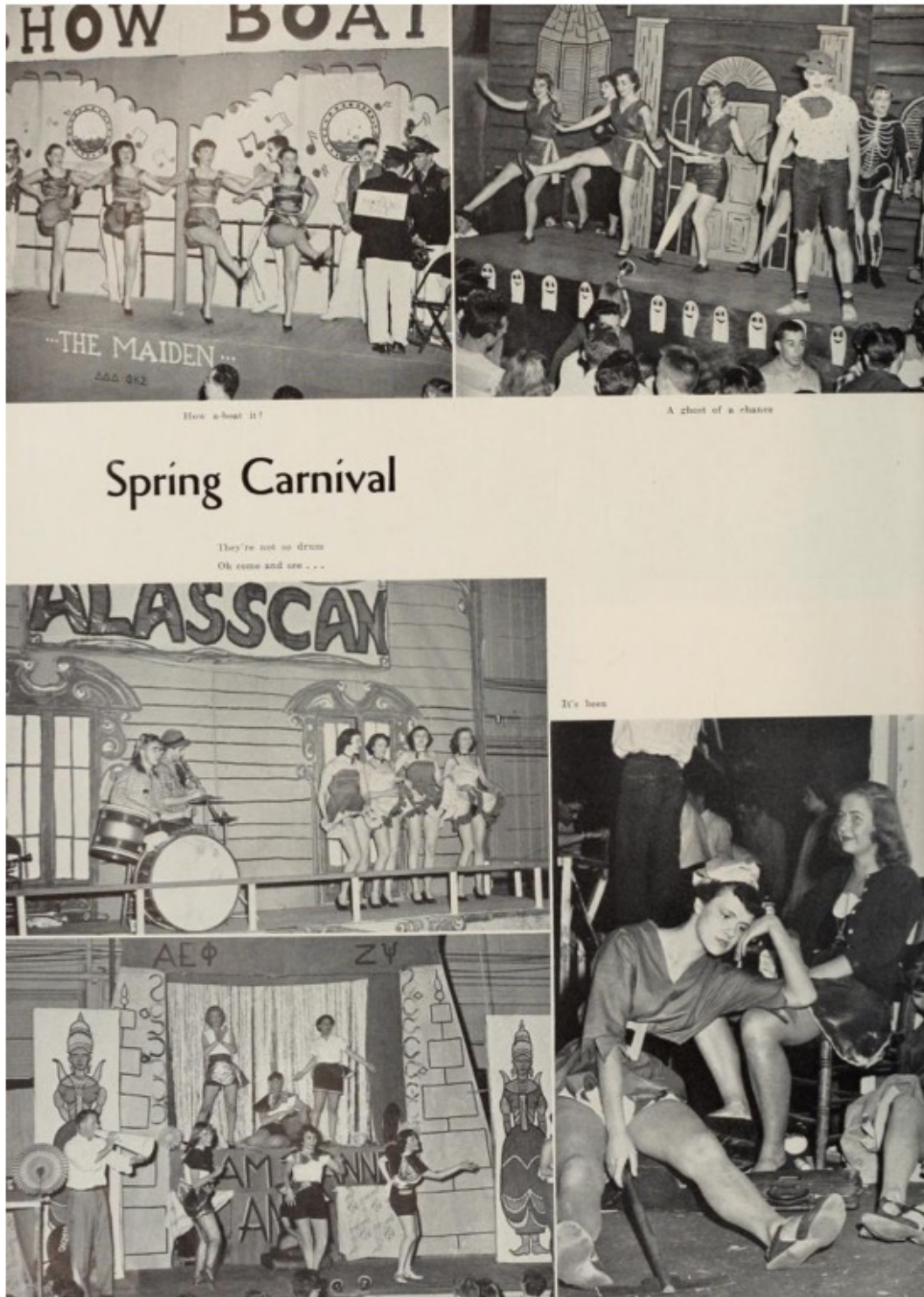
In the pot



Fig. 7. Some of the 1952 homecoming displays in front of student houses. (1953 Illio, University of Illinois Archives)



**Fig. 8. Class break skits in the streets near campus advertising some of the 1953 Spring Carnival shows. (1953 Illio, University of Illinois Archives)**



**Fig. 9. Some of the 1953 Spring Carnival shows. (1953 Illio, University of Illinois Archives)**



**Fig. 10. Lowell and his future wife, Mary Ruth Clardy, 1952 Senior Ball. Tuxedos and strapless gowns were standard attire at dances in that era.**



**Fig. 11. At the 1952 Military Ball.**

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**Fig. 12. ROTC cadet Corps marching to form up for the 1952 Mother's Day/Honors Day parade. The author is the officer cadet in the left foreground.**

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**Fig. 13. The author 's graduation photo (June 20, 1953) taken in front of the Alma Mater statue, in its original location behind the University Auditorium.**

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**Fig. 14. Current location of Alma Mater Statue, on the sidewalk leading from Campus Town to the northeast corner of the Quad. “New” addition to the Student Union directly behind the statue; original Union to left of forked tree. Altgeld Hall to the right of the statue. During most noontimes in the late 1940s and early 1950s, law students “pitched pennies” at the front bottom step of the front entrance. (University of Illinois Archives)**



**Fig. 15. The west broadwalk, April 2013. Some of the students are texting or talking on their smart phones. Note the women are not wearing dresses. Also note that all students are carrying their books in backpacks. Lincoln Hall in the background.**

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**Fig. 16. Another view of the west broadwalk, April 2013. Compare dress of students and presence of backpacks with those in Figure 1.**



**Fig. 17. West broadwalk, April 2013. The student in the foreground is listening to his iPod with small earplugs.**

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**Fig. 18. Two students texting, two listening to their iPods. Lincoln Hall, recently renovated on the inside, but little changed on the outside.**

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**Fig. 19. The English Building, formerly Bevier Hall, similar in appearance on the outside as in the 1940s-50s, completely renovated on the inside.**

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