

ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS HOMECOMING

INTRODUCTION

For over 100 years, towns in the United States have been holding annual homecomings to welcome back former residents. However, the University of Illinois has long claimed to be the originator of the *collegiate* Homecoming – the annual alumni event centered on a football game. The first Homecoming at the University of Illinois was held in 1910.

Long before that year, though, other schools were holding alumni gatherings in the form of an annual alumni football game. For example, the annual Harvard-Yale game – a series that extends back to the 1870s – attracted large numbers of alumni. Beginning in 1897, the University of Michigan Student Athletic Association sponsored a yearly alumni game. But does an alumni game in itself constitute a homecoming?

HOMECOMING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Archival sources credit two men for the founding of Homecoming at the University of Illinois: seniors Clarence Foss Williams, Class of 1910, and W. Elmer Ekblaw, Classes of 1910 and 1912. According to Williams' recollection in 1930, the Homecoming idea came to them early in 1910 while he and Ekblaw were sitting on the old YMCA steps discussing ways and means of contributing to their Alma Mater. They agreed that a football game should be the centerpiece of the celebration, serving as a "magnet" to attract the alumni.¹

Williams and Ekblaw fleshed out their Homecoming plan and submitted it to the members of the senior honorary society Shield and Trident, which approved the idea. On Sunday, March 13, 1910, the two senior honorary societies – the Shield and Trident and the Phoenix – met in the basement of the YMCA and resolved to urge the Council of Administration, the University's central body for student affairs and regulation, to sanction an annual Homecoming. A committee of five, chaired by George Schoeffel, Class of 1910, was appointed to draft a petition to the council.

Even at this early stage, the Homecoming plan had been developed in some detail. It was proposed that the first one be held on Oct. 15, 1910, when the Illini were scheduled to meet their great rival, the University of Chicago Maroons, coached by Amos Alonzo Stagg. Illinois had not beaten Chicago in seven years. But Homecoming was not intended to be only about football. Important annual student traditions like the freshman-sophomore pushball game, fraternity initiations, class reunions and the Hobo Band were also slated for Homecoming Weekend.²

The Daily Illini, the University's student newspaper, quickly got behind the Homecoming idea. This was not surprising, given the fact that Ekblaw happened to be the

¹ C. F. Williams, "How It All Came About," Twenty-First Annual Homecoming Program (October 18, 1930), 7; Daily Illini, October 29, 1927, p. 25, col. 2.

² Williams, 7; Daily Illini, March 15, 1910, p. 1, col. 4.

newspaper's chief reporter. "Nothing could do more to attract the alumni and alumnae back to their Alma Mater than such a home-coming," The Daily Illini asserted in a March 15 pro-Homecoming editorial, the first of many. The newspaper argued that the traditional alumni reunions held during commencement week were "unsatisfactory" because "the underclassmen have gone home and so fail to meet the old Illinois men and women," and as for the seniors, they were too busy with graduation to take heed of visitors.³

Schoeffel's committee had completed its work by April 12, 1910, when the Homecoming petition was formally presented to the Council of Administration. The petition contained several resolutions, one of which spelled out the primary rationale for a Homecoming:

Whereas, it is the belief of your petitioner that the setting aside of such a day as a holiday would afford alumni and students the opportunity to come into closer touch with each other, and that a true conception of the real greatness of the University that would result would create a more active and sincere loyalty to the University.⁴

Thus, Homecoming would serve as an advertisement for the University. The petition was referred to the Council's Committee on Student Organizations and Activities "with a special request that among other things they attempt to gain information as to the probability of the alumni participating in such a celebration."⁵

At least according to The Daily Illini, alumni interest in the proposed Homecoming was high. Quoted in the student newspaper, The Illini Club Bulletin of Chicago, for example, pronounced Homecoming "a commendable idea" and urged that the Council of Administration sanction it. When this official approval seemed to be too slow in coming, the Bulletin asked: "What has become of the movement for the establishment of a Fall Homecoming? If the petition for this plan has been lost in the intricate labyrinths of University Senate committees and subcommittees, let a rescuing party be sent after it before it is strangled in the tangled meshes of official red tape."⁶

Finally, on May 24, 1910, the Council of Administration approved Oct. 14 as a Homecoming day but "with the understanding that it will be determined later whether this shall be made an annual event." For the Council, this first Homecoming would be an experiment, the success or failure of which would decide its future. A jubilant Daily Illini predicted that Homecoming would become "a particularly and distinctively Illinois institution which if successful will without doubt be followed by other Universities."⁷

Events now moved rapidly. In early summer, the senior honorary societies created a Homecoming committee, with Ekblaw as chairman and professor S. W. Parr, Class of 1884, and alumnus Charles Kiler, Class of 1892, as members. The Illini Union, headed by Bryant Bannister, Class of 1911, was given the task of arranging the event. News of

³ Daily Illini, March 15, 1910, p. 4, cols. 1-3.

⁴ Ibid, April 13, 1910, p. 1, col. 2.

⁵ Council of Administration Minutes, April 12, 1910, Record Series 3/1/1, University of Illinois Archives.

⁶ Daily Illini, April 3, 1910, p. 4, cols. 1-3; ibid, June 5, 1910, p. 4, cols. 1-3.

⁷ Council of Administration Minutes, May 24, 1910; Daily Illini, May 29, 1910, p. 1, col. 3.

the Homecoming was spread among the alumni, the participation of students and faculty was encouraged, and the assistance of businessmen, financial or otherwise, was sought.⁸

In September, Bannister, Ekblaw and representatives of the two senior societies named the members of seven Homecoming committees: advertising, accommodations, program, finance, souvenir, enthusiasm and steering. These committees gave the Homecoming plans “definite form,” in Ekblaw’s words, and carried the ball to the goal line. To realize this end, money was raised from the sale of cardboard Homecoming tags and from the subscriptions of merchants. It was decided to inundate the campus in a sea of orange and blue on Homecoming Weekend – from the orange and blue “Loyalty” hats to the orange and blue bunting hanging from the University buildings. The Athletic Association also did its part, furnishing 5,000 extra seats for the football game.⁹

By early October, the Homecoming program had been settled. On the afternoon of Friday the 14th, three events were scheduled: a match between the Illinois baseball team (nicknamed the “Illinois 1,000 Per Cent Team” because of its perfect record in 1910) and the Alumni All Stars, a squad composed of ex-Illini; the annual pushball contest pitting the sophomores against the freshmen; and performances of the Hobo Band. For Friday evening, a band reunion, a mass meeting and various initiations and banquets were planned. The following morning, the annual interclass track meet would be held. And then, at 2:30 p.m., the centerpiece of the entire event – the Illinois-Chicago football game – would kick off.¹⁰

On Oct. 12, 1910, the Council of Administration declared a campus holiday for the 14th, beginning at noon, and for all of the 15th. As expected, the highlight of Homecoming proved to be the Illinois-Chicago game, “one of the hardest football battles ever held on Illinois field.”¹¹ A record crowd of an estimated 12,000 persons witnessed a 3-0 Illinois victory secured by a field goal by Otto Seiler, Class of 1912. The sights on Illinois Field that day impressed a reporter. “A description of the crowd would be beyond words,” the journalist wrote. “Under the blue skies of a perfect October day there was a great mountain of humanity in the grand stands on either side of the field.”¹²

The Daily Illini was quick to declare Homecoming an unqualified success and touted the University as the originator of the event:

The echoes of the events of this great Home-coming will be heard as long as the University endures, for it is now almost a certainty that it will be adopted as a permanent annual institution the like of which no other University can boast. Illinois may well pride itself on being the originator of the plan for drawing home the alumni, a plan which will undoubtedly be adopted generally.

⁸ Ibid, August 2, 1910, p. 1, col. 2; *ibid*, September 20, 1910, p. 1, col. 1; W. Elmer Ekblaw, “University of Illinois Fall Home-coming,” *The Western Intercollegiate Magazine* 2:2 (November 1910), 22.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Daily Illini*, October 5, 1910, p. 1, col. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid*, October 29, 1927, p. 25, col. 2.

¹² “Illinois Field’s Greatest Crowd,” ca. October 16, 1910, unidentified newspaper, found in Edmund James Scrapbooks, Record Series 2/5/10, University of Illinois Archives.

Writing in the *Western Intercollegiate Magazine*, Ekblaw also predicted that “a similar home-coming” would be adopted by “other western universities which desire to bring their alumni into closer touch with their university interests.”¹³

Though UI president Edmund James himself praised the Homecoming, the Council of Administration never seems to have sanctioned the event as a permanent institution. Indeed, a Council committee appointed in 1911 to consider the Homecoming question decided to defer the issue. Nonetheless, Homecomings have been held on the University of Illinois campus in every year since 1910, with the important exception of 1918, when the event was apparently canceled because of the great influenza epidemic of that year.¹⁴

ALUMNI EVENTS AT OTHER UNIVERSITIES

University of Michigan

Beginning in 1897, the University of Michigan Student Athletic Association sponsored Alumni Games, pitting the UM football varsity squad against a team made up of former Michigan players. As early as 1898, the UM band, glee and banjo clubs, fraternities and other university groups were all participating in the event. According to Charles Baird, an early UM graduate director of athletics, the Alumni Game had been organized for three reasons: to gain alumni support for the university’s athletic teams; to allow the current football players to benefit from the experience and knowledge of their predecessors; and to bring the alumni together “so that they may renew old acquaintances and promote good fellowship, college spirit and interest in their alma mater.” In 1900, the format of the Alumni Games changed, with the opposing team now hailing from a rival university.¹⁵ That year the opponent was Purdue.

The Alumni Games differed from the modern homecoming in several ways. For one thing, they were relatively informal affairs. According to Greg Kinney, sports archivist at the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library, these alumni events were “not centrally organized and had a rather ad hoc nature at least until the 1930s.” In fact, Kinney was not able to find in his sources “anything declaring a particular game to be the continuation of the Alumni Game tradition” after 1900. The Alumni Games also don’t seem to have captured the imagination of the student body. The Michigan student

¹³ *Daily Illini*, October 18, 1910, p. 1, col. 4; Ekblaw, 21.

¹⁴ *Daily Illini*, October 20, 1910, p. 1, col. 5; Council of Administration Minutes, May 12, 1911; Fred Turner Oral History, Fred Turner Papers, Box 1, Record Series 41/1/20, University of Illinois Archives. In an oral history, Turner said that Homecoming was not held his freshman year, 1918. “In fact, they played the game that was supposed to be the Homecoming game with no one present, because the flu epidemic was in progress and they played it with locked gates,” Turner recalled. “The game was played on Illinois field without anyone there. I watched it through the gates.” An extensive search of the *Illio* and the *Daily Illini* failed to turn up any evidence of a Homecoming being held in 1918. Indeed, the *Illio* 1921 refers to the Illini returning in droves for the 1919 Victory Homecoming “after two years of exile.” (*Illio* 1921, 149.) The University of Illinois Archives has a “Homecoming Register” with alumni signatures for the years 1913-1922, including entries for 1918. However, the register was not only used for Homecoming. Alumni could sign this register whenever they returned to campus. Besides, the register lacks dates for specific days in 1918 on which the football homecoming could have been held.

¹⁵ *Michigan Alumnus*, October 1898, 20, Reference Files, University of Illinois Archives; *ibid*, November 1900, 70, *ibid*.

newspaper generally did not make a “big deal” of these affairs.¹⁶ This was not entirely surprising since large numbers of alumni returned for every Michigan home game.

Finally, these events were not formally called “homecoming” until rather late in the day. The first known informal reference to the Alumni Game as a “homecoming” occurred in the 1916 *Michiganensian* in an article describing the Cornell game of 1915. After 1916, the term “homecoming” seems to disappear, Kinney wrote. The sports archivist sampled the Michigan yearbooks and student newspapers up to 1930 and found no evidence of the term being used during this period. The Michigan football media guide does not specifically refer to a game as homecoming until 1948, Kinney related, and the 1947 football program is the first one to feature “Homecoming” on its cover.¹⁷

Indiana University

On Nov. 20, 1909, Indiana University held a Gala Day to mark the annual football game with Purdue. A relatively informal affair, Gala Day does not seem to have been geared specifically to the alumni. Indeed, in 1986, Kit Klingelhoffer, a onetime Indiana University sports information director, offered the opinion that Indiana’s first homecoming was in 1910, not 1909 – despite a claim in the IU press guide equating Gala Day with Homecoming.¹⁸

On Oct. 20, 1910, the following year, a student group called the Indiana Union set into motion plans for an alumni homecoming to be held on Nov. 5, the day of the Illinois game. The “homecoming feature” coupled to the big game of the year was apparently a winning combination for the IU alumni. Before long, the IU student newspaper, the *Daily Student*, could report that the “Home-coming movement is now on in Indiana University.”¹⁹

A movement usually has a leader, and the editors of *The Daily Illini* were not shy in claiming this distinction for their university. The DI went so far as to accuse Indiana University of copying the homecoming idea:

As *The Daily Illini* predicted before the Fall Home Coming, other institutions have adopted that plan of drawing home the alumni, Indiana probably being the first one. . . . Perhaps, though, after the game November 5th, Indiana will have had its fill of Illinois customs and habits, particularly the old one of defeating the Hoosiers in football.

The *Daily Student* did not answer the DI’s charge directly, merely remarking that “Illinois people like that kind of talk same as we like to stroke our own backs over here.”²⁰

¹⁶ Greg Kinney to William Maher, April 4, 2005, e-mail communication, April 4, 2005, original is held in the University of Illinois Archives College and Universities Correspondence Files.

¹⁷ *Michiganensian* 20 (1916), 297; Kinney to Maher.

¹⁸ *The Daily Student*, November 19, 1909, p. 1, cols. 2-3; *ibid*, November 20, 1909, p. 1, col. 2; *ibid*, November 22, 1909, p. 1, col. 1; Dick Kishpaugh to Tab Bennett, September 30, 1986, Homecoming Reference File, University of Illinois Archives. Brad Cook, an archivist at Indiana University, believes that Gala Day was IU’s first homecoming.

¹⁹ *The Daily Student*, October 21, 1910, p. 1, col. 2; *ibid*, October 25, 1910, p. 1, col. 1. Thanks to Ellen Swain for these articles.

²⁰ *Daily Illini*, October 26, 1910, p. 4, col. 1; *The Daily Student*, October 28, 1910, p. 2, col. 1.

The Indiana University homecoming took place on schedule on Nov. 5, 1910. The Illini defeated the Hoosiers by a score of 3-0, with Seiler's foot again carrying the day.

Baylor University

On Nov. 24-25, 1909, Baylor University held an alumni event specifically called a "Home-Coming." According to the Baylor University Bulletin, the "purpose of the Home-Coming was to give an opportunity for the joyful meeting of former student friends, an occasion when old classmates could again feel the warm hand-clasp of their fellows, recall old memories and associations, and catch the Baylor spirit again." The event – the result of an appeal by Baylor president Samuel Palmer Brooks – had been planned six months in advance. The Home-Coming featured a concert, a pep rally, a parade, a bonfire and a football game. In this Thanksgiving Day game, Baylor defeated Texas Christian University by a score of 6-3.²¹ The next Baylor Home-coming apparently was not held until 1915.

Northern Illinois University

On Oct. 12, 1906, Northern Illinois State Normal School held its first annual alumni banquet. The following day, Northern Illinois' football team played an alumni squad in a match that resulted in a 0-0 tie. Subsequently, a provision in the 1907 constitution of the school's Alumni Association stated that "There shall be a social meeting of the alumni and guests, annually following the annual football game, on the evening of the second Saturday of October." Significantly, in these annual football games, Northern Illinois did not play an intercollegiate opponent until 1914 in a contest against Wheaton College. According to Glen Gildemeister, university archivist at NIU, "homecoming" was not used as a proper noun formally by the school until 1911. Nonetheless, Gildemeister maintains that NIU's formal homecoming began on Oct. 12-13, 1906, and was formalized in the 1907 Alumni Association constitution. "If Homecoming is the gathering of alums with organized social events built around an annual football game, we date to 1906," the NIU archivist wrote.²²

CONCLUSION

The homecoming movement spread like wildfire in the years after 1910. Within the next several years, many other universities – Wisconsin and Missouri in 1911, Arizona in 1914, to name a few – launched their own homecomings. Writing in 1930, Williams noted that "virtually every college in the land has since become vitally interested in Homecomings of one kind or another." Williams described the homecoming idea as having been "contagious."²³

Certainly, the University of Illinois promoters of Homecoming believed that they were the first to invent the event. This mistaken notion persisted in part because of the

²¹ Baylor University Bulletin 13:1 (January 1910), 1; Baylor Homecoming 2000--History website, <http://www3.baylor.edu/Homecoming/history.html>.

²² Glen Gildemeister, "Homecoming," Quick Reference File #63, Northern Illinois University Archives; Northern Star, October 22, 2002.

²³ Williams, 7.

efforts of Williams himself. Throughout his long life (he died in 1971), the onetime journalist touted his role as the supposed originator of Homecoming. This claim, probably never seriously examined, soon attained the status of “fact” through its frequent repetition in the columns of the *Illinois Alumni News* and other UI publications. Later in life, Williams often visited the Urbana campus and was invariably hailed as the co-founder of Homecoming. He was a zealous defender of his reputation, and indeed, in his own obituary (which he wrote for the Phi Kappa Psi newsletter), referred to himself as the originator of “the first college Homecoming in the United States.”²⁴

So, what can be said about the University of Illinois and the origins of homecoming? One can define homecoming as a well-planned, University-sponsored annual alumni event centering on an intercollegiate football game. Michigan, Northern Illinois University and Indiana University held homecoming-like events prior to 1910, but these events did not have the degree of planning associated with the first Illinois homecoming of 1910, nor did they employ the defining title of “Homecoming.” Baylor University, on the other hand, did hold a well-planned alumni event specifically called “Home-Coming” in 1909, one year before Illinois’ first Homecoming. The Texas school, though, had not started a tradition: The next Baylor homecoming was not held until 1915.

Thanks to the 1918 hiatus, the Illinois Homecoming tradition cannot be said to have been continuous since 1910. At the very least, Illinois can claim to have had the longest tradition called “homecoming” and to have self-consciously created the event with the intention of it being a precedent that would be adopted by other institutions.²⁵

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²⁴ C. F. Williams Morgue File, Record Series 26/4/1, University of Illinois Archives. In 1957, when a column in the *Detroit Free Press* referred to another Illinois man as the founder of Homecoming, Williams sent off a letter to the writer: “In 1956, I was honored as one of the founders at the Illinois-Minnesota homecoming game. I was introduced to the crowd with Dr. Lloyd Mowry (sic), president of the University. I was honored at a pep rally the day previous to the game, and was a guest on television and radio, with surviving brothers of Dr. Ekblaw. For a quarter of a century and longer I have been introduced in Champaign and Urbana and at alumni meetings here and there as a co-founder with Elmer Ekblaw.” Ibid.

²⁵ In November 1953, Williams re-created the moment when he and W. Elmer Ekblaw supposedly sat on the steps of the old YMCA and conceived the Homecoming idea. Ekblaw had died in 1949, so Williams posed for the cameras with Elmer’s brother, George. A photo of this staged event appeared in the *Illinois Alumni News*. Somewhat ironically, the photo caption writer seems to have gotten it about right when he or she wrote, “Illinois was the first university to hold annual reunions under this (Homecoming) title.” Ibid.