

Making College Affordable in the 1930s

During the 1930s, tuitions rose at private and state schools across the country. Costs of attending college went up even as incomes and resources for most college students declined. Historian John R. Thelin notes that:

To cope with these impediments, students cut room and board expenses by seeking out cooperative living arrangements, by renting rooms in cheap boarding houses, or by living at home... At many universities, students economized by skipping meals, relying on bottles of milk kept cold on windowsills during the winter months as an alternative to breakfast or lunch....[2004:252]

Students at Old Normal were fortunate to attend a relatively affordable university. ISNU's 1936 Undergraduate Catalogue notes that its "school fees and living expenses" [were] "exceedingly reasonable" compared to other institutions. Indeed, ISNU students who promised to teach in Illinois for three years could attend the university tuition free. This must have been attractive as enrollments at ISNU increased 46% in the six years between 1929 and 1935, even though jobs were not easy to come by upon graduation.



[Student Cartoon, *Index*, 1935]

ISNU students made do with little. Historian Helen Marshall, who came to Old Normal in the 1930s, described them:

A large percentage of the students hope to work their way through school. Some did well to raise enough money for tuition. Many worked for board and room. Some brought food from home and lived in the cheapest of furnished rooms, cooking their meals on gas burners in basements or on single electric plates in their rooms. Their

clothing was often shabby and worn. Patched blue jeans were not uncommon and sox were saved for special occasions. [1956:286-287]



[A student prepares a meal in his room, 1908. This photograph from Marshall's book (pg. 210) is from a much earlier period, we have found few photos of boarding rooms and their kitchenettes).

Images of the collegiate elite—the socialites who regularly attended dances and events—dominate student yearbook imagery. With no student union at the time, many social events took place in the two residence halls on campus. The student newspapers regularly ran advertisements for breakfasts and dinner; for coffee, ice-cream, pie and soda; for hamburgers and tamales.



[Collage of Ads from 1930s Videttes]

One might get the impression that students ate out frequently. Our interviewees tell us differently. Indeed, more than one interviewee commented, “we didn't spend money on food.” (Elizabeth Smith, Ruth Ryder personal communication).

Read more about Ruth Blacker Ryder and her sisters and their meals during the Depression...