

# Gastman Was Powerful Force in Early Decatur Education

By TOM EMERY  
Enquirer-Democrat Contributor

The rich history of Illinois State University dates to the first day of classes on Oct. 5, 1857. The first student became a towering figure in education in Decatur.

Enoch A. Gastman is considered the original student in university history, as he was the first to register on the inaugural day of classes. He later spent forty-seven years as a teacher and superintendent in the Decatur school system before his retirement at age 73 in 1907.

During his long tenure, Gastman became a revered figure in Decatur. A 1903 account reported that “thus leaving his guidance, young men and women have gone out in the world, many of them to attain prominence and honor.”

Gastman’s story began on that first morning at Illinois State, when he was one of nineteen students – six men and thirteen women – who showed up for classes. At 23, Gastman was slightly older than most of the others.

At the time, the fledgling

university did not have a permanent home. For the first three years of its existence, the school conducted classes in Major’s Hall, a three-story structure at the southwest corner of Front and East Streets in Bloomington.

Sixteen months before the opening of ISU, Major’s Hall was the site of Abraham Lincoln’s legendary “Lost Speech” at the first Republican State Convention on May 29, 1856. Major’s Hall was demolished in February 1959.

From those modest beginnings, Illinois State rose to become a premier university in its original mission, the training of teachers. In 1965, the Illinois Board of Higher Education authorized academic programs that did not require teacher certification. The new courses became effective in September 1966.

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A product of Hudson, north of Bloomington, Gastman was described by a later account as “tall, angular, and awkward.” Lyman Kellogg, an 1864 Illinois State graduate who later was the founding president of

Emporia State University in Kansas, remembered Gastman as “large of size, red-haired and red-whiskered [and] the most formidable looking member of the class.”

In his later years, Gastman was also said to be “a plain man, plain in speech, plain in his manners, and plain in his living. He walked with some difficulty, as he had cut his ankle with an ax while splitting rails as a youth, leaving him, in the words of the day, “lame.” It was just one of many challenges that Gastman found a way to overcome.

Gastman was one of the ten graduates at the university’s first Commencement on June 29, 1860, and started work as a third-grade teacher in Decatur that September 10.

On July 12, 1862, Gastman was named to the concurrent positions of Decatur school superintendent and high school principal. He was the first to hold both positions, and remained until the end of the school year immediately preceding his death – a total of forty-five years.

Students, teachers, and

board members in Decatur all spoke glowingly of Gastman, who was certainly was not in it for the money. His first teaching job in Decatur paid \$45 per month for a six-month term, and his superintendent’s position was hired at a monthly salary of \$80. The average annual salary for his entire career as Decatur superintendent was \$1,728.50.

Eleven days after his appointment as Decatur superintendent, he married Frances Augusta Peterson, a classmate from the first graduating class of 1860 at Normal, who also taught in Decatur. Sadly, she passed away in February 1863, after only eight months of marriage.

It was the second tragedy for Gastman in less than a year. On March 22, 1862, his younger brother, Francis, died of disease in a camp hospital in southern Missouri during the Civil War. Francis was a corporal in Company A of the 33rd Illinois, the famed “Teacher’s Regiment,” which contained many Illinois State students and faculty. He was just 20 years old.

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In August 1864, Gastman wed again, to Caroline Sargent, another teacher from Decatur. That union spanned forty years and produced five children, but only two survived past their twenties. A three-year-old daughter died in 1868, while in 1893, two sons died within ten days of each other.

Caroline died on April 3, 1904, and Enoch married for a third time, on Christmas Day 1905 at the age of seventy-one.

Former Illinois State Normal president John Cook summarized Gastman best; “while a good share of the joy of life came to him, for he had a sunny disposition, he was a man of many sorrows, yet he bore them with a fortitude that was heroic.”

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Recognized around the state for his skills and leadership, Gastman variously served as both president and treasurer of the State Teachers Association, and was a board member of the National Education Association. As an obituary aptly reported, “His fame was national.” Still, he turned down

multiple teaching positions, both on the secondary and college level, to stay in Decatur.

Statewide, Gastman joined the state Board of Education in 1871, the same body that oversaw the creation of Illinois State, and remained in that post until his death. From 1887-89 and beginning again in 1902, he was the Board president. During his long tenure on the Board, he reportedly never missed a meeting.

In addition, Gastman served as president of the Normal Alumni Association, as he remained close to the university that had launched his career.

Gastman finally retired in the spring of 1907 at age 73, a remarkable achievement in a time of reduced life expectancy. That June, he attended the semi-centennial gala at Illinois State. It was one of the last big events in his life, as he died just weeks later, on August 2.

His death was front-page news in Decatur, and the city also named a school in his honor. It was a fitting tribute to the man who influenced education both in his adopted hometown and across the state.

## May is Foster Parent Appreciation Month

Edited By TODD MARVER  
Enquirer-Democrat Reporter

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is proudly recognizing May as Foster Parent Appreciation Month, a time to acknowledge and celebrate the extraordinary foster families and relative and kinship caregivers across the state who have opened their hearts, their homes and their lives to care for the state’s most vulnerable children.

“Our incredible foster parents, relative and kinship caregivers are our true partners as we work to transform Illinois from a child welfare system into a child well-being system,” said Illinois DCFS Director Heidi E. Mueller. “Their commitment not only helps create brighter futures for children, but it also strengthens our shared vision – that every child and youth can grow and thrive in a family.”

Illinois DCFS makes every effort to reunify children with their families whenever it is possible. In the small number of cases where reunification

cannot occur – less than 4% of the time – the Department strives to ensure children remain connected to their community, school and the people they love. To make this possible, DCFS works diligently to recruit families in every area of the state to join the 6,352 licensed foster families who have already made the life changing decision to welcome children into their homes.

Becoming a foster parent is a serious and meaningful commitment to a child. Illinois DCFS offers a wide range of services to ensure foster parents have the support they need to help the children in their home thrive. These supports include ongoing training and a monthly stipend to help cover essentials such as food, clothing and housing. Youth in care also receive medical coverage designed specifically for their needs; therapeutic, educational, recreational and crisis support services; and access to caseworkers and peer support groups who can assist the youth and their foster family. To further support foster families, the DCFS Startup Funds

Program provides preloaded Visa cards to help offset the costs and provide items a child needs when they arrive at the home. This allows caregivers to quickly and easily purchase bedding, clothing, personal hygiene items and other essentials to help the child feel safe, supported and welcomed.

Complementing the Department’s traditional foster care program is the new Relative Caregiver Certification program, made possible through the passage of the KIND Act, signed into law by Governor JB Pritzker in 2025. This program is creating a path for the 8,700 children and youth in care who are living with relatives. The Relative Caregiver Certification program provides increased financial benefits and a simplified process for relatives, such as grandparents, to become certified caregivers. As a result of this initiative and the department’s focus on ensuring timely permanency for all youth in care, Illinois has been ranked #1 in the country for kinship care by the Administration for Children and Families.

Together, these programs strengthen the Department’s commitment to ensuring every child and youth in our care is living with a loving and supportive family, reducing barriers that can delay permanency by expanding resources for traditional foster families, and easing the path for relatives who step in to care for the children they know and love.

Foster homes are needed for children of all ages, including sibling groups, adolescents, African American and Latino children, children with special medical needs, teenage mothers and their babies and LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex and asexual) children. To learn more about some of the children in need of a foster family, visit the Heart Gallery of Illinois at <https://letitbeus.org/heart-gallery-of-illinois/>.

To learn more about becoming a licensed foster parent, fill out the online interest form on the DCFS website: <https://dcfs.illinois.gov>. Click on Loving Homes, then on Become a Foster or Adoptive Parent.

## IDNR’s furbearer grant application period closes May 15

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is accepting applications for the State Furbearer Fund Special Funds Grant Program through May 15. The State Furbearer Fund provides grants to appropriate not-for-profit organizations, governmental entities, educational institutions, and corporations for projects that benefit furbearing mammals and improve harvesting opportunities for hunters and trappers of furbearers. Furbearing mammals are defined as badger, beaver, bobcat, coyote, grey fox, mink, muskrat, otter, opossum, raccoon, red fox, skunk, least weasel, and long-tailed weasel. Grants from the fund support activities and programs undertaken to:

- Provide instruction and training to current and potential hunters and trappers on techniques and laws associated with hunting and trapping furbearing mammals.
- Support scientific research on ecology, conservation or management of furbearing mammals.
- Develop or improve public furbearing mammal habitat management areas within Illinois. Entities must be registered in the state’s GATA portal prior to applying. Applications will be accepted online in the Amplifund online portal. Go online to search for all current state funding opportunities. For questions or assistance, email [susan.duke@illinois.gov](mailto:susan.duke@illinois.gov).

- Educate hunters, trappers and the public about furbearing mammals and their management.

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## Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway Launches Commemorative Visitor Guide and Business Directory for Centennial

Edited By TODD MARVER  
Enquirer-Democrat Reporter

The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Mother Road with the release of a special commemorative Visitor Guide and Business Directory, designed to help travelers explore the rich history, iconic attractions, and vibrant communities along the Illinois portion of Route 66.

“The Centennial is an opportunity to celebrate not only the history of Route 66 but also the small businesses and quirky roadside attractions that give the road its soul,” said Casey Claypool, Executive Director of the

Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway. “This visitor guide serves as the map to this year’s celebrations, helping enthusiasts discover everything Illinois Route 66 has to offer—from historic sites and charming towns to must-see attractions across the Northern, Central, and Southern sections of the state.”

The guide provides an easy-to-use summary of towns and attractions, complete with maps, must-stop highlights, and resources for planning an unforgettable Route 66 journey. It can be downloaded directly from the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway website or requested to be mailed through the site.

In addition, a limited-edition Centennial Coin Set has been created to commemorate this milestone anniversary. The set, which is Route 66 Centennial Certified, includes 12 attraction coins featuring iconic Illinois Route 66 sites, one official Scenic Byway coin, and is individually numbered with a Certificate of Authenticity. Twelve sets contain a bonus gold coin that unlocks VIP access to the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway Statewide Conference and Route 66 Centennial Celebration in Springfield on November 11, 2026, including full conference access, VIP seating, meals, a swag bag, and overnight ac-

commodations. For more information, to explore the guide, or to stay updated on the Centennial, visit [illinoisroute66.org](https://illinoisroute66.org) and follow the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway on Facebook and Instagram.

You can request your free copy of the Commemorative Visitor Guide and Business Directory at <https://illinoisroute66.org/maps-brochures/#-explore-form>.

You can purchase the limited-edition Centennial Coin Set and other Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway merchandise at <https://illinoisroute66.app.neoncrm.com/np/clients/illinoisroute66/giftstore.jsp>.

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**Illinois Valley Senior Citizens Menu**  
Carlinville 217-716-2337 • Benld 217-835-3174

Monday, May 11	Tuesday, May 12	Wednesday, May 13	Thursday, May 14	Friday, May 15
Beef Stroganoff, WG Dinner Roll, Peas & Carrots, Fruit Cocktail	Chicken Salad, WG Bread, Loaded Potato Soup, Kidney Bean Salad, Mandarin Oranges	Ground Beef w/ Red Beans & Rice, WG Bread, Corn, Tropical Fruit	Turkey Burger, WG Bun, Oven Roasted Potatoes, Broccoli, Apricots	Roast Beef, WG Bread, Red Skinned Mashed Potatoes, Tomatoes & Zucchini, Jello Poke Cake w/ Strawberries

Meal reservations must be made by 11:00 a.m. on the day BEFORE you wish to receive a meal