

THE CONROES AND BARDENS OF ALFRED

If you know anything about Alfred, New York, you may know that there are several families who have been there for many years. The McMahons, the Drakes, the Davis/Loboughs, the Ellises, the Scholes, the Seidlins and the McLanes to name a few. The first generation of Conroe/Bardens lived there and were associated with the University for about sixteen years from 1917 to 1935.

In 1917, Irwin Conroe was 18 years old and had just graduated from high school. He was the only one of his siblings to accomplish this. His family lived on a small farm in Columbia County, New York, where young men were expected to go into farming.

One day, he received a request from his former high school principal who had become the superintendent of schools in a rural area of Allegany County in western New York State. Irwin was asked to move west and become a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. The only qualifications required were being a high school graduate and at least eighteen.

He accepted and began a career in education. Always wanting to improve his circumstances, he began taking course work at Alfred University, Alfred, New York, near where he was teaching in Canaseraga. He lived with the Gould family, who became like extended family. Irwin continued his studies, was active in student life (including his role as a founder of Klan Alpine Fraternity), and received a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in English and Speech.

In 1920, a young woman named Lillian Barden transferred to Alfred University from Skidmore College to major in art in the New York State College of Ceramics and Fine Art. At that time, New York State operated colleges required no tuition, and Lillian went on to complete her degree and become an art teacher.

In 1921, Lillian's younger sister, Frances, came to Alfred University after spending a post-high school year tutoring high school students in their home town of Unadilla, New York. She had graduated at age 17, and She planned to major in mathematics.

Irwin was very bright and ambitious and, while still an undergraduate, began teaching classes of Freshman Composition. Frances was one of his students in her Freshman year.

By 1923, Irwin graduated from Alfred and became a fulltime faculty member. The Barden family was having financial difficulties, and it was decided that Frances would not be able to continue in the final two years of a college education. Lillian's situation was not in jeopardy due to the lack of any tuition in her program.

Frances and Irwin had become more than good friends, probably dating during her Sophomore year, he proposed to her after it was decided that she couldn't return as a student. They were married December 31, 1923, at the Barden family home in Unadilla and took the train to Alfred. They rented a small house that the University owned on Main St. and soon were expecting their first child. Their daughter, Cornelia Marie

(Connie) was born in October at Unadilla.

They enjoyed life in Alfred, and Irwin taught both English and Public Speaking . They eventually bought a Greek revival home at 99 North Main Street. Irwin proceeded to study for and complete a Master's degree at Columbia University in New York City. Their son, Barden, was born in 1928 at Bethesda Hospital in Hornell. In 1931, their third child, Bruce, was born at the same hospital, and Irwin had been promoted to Dean of Faculty of the University. Also that year, Frances' sister, Lillian married Anthony Gerace in Hornell with a family reception at the Conroes'.

Both Connie and Barden started elementary school in South Hall, on the University campus. Many years later, Bruce completed Economics and Education courses in the same building.

In 1935, Irwin accepted an offer of a position in the New York State Department of Education in Albany. Their house was sold to the McLanes, and the family moved to the Capitol area and settled in the suburb of Delmar.

Years later, in 1948, Barden entered Alfred, following completion of a military enlistment. He studied ceramic engineering and, after graduation, went to work for the Corning Glass Company. In 1953 he married Alfred graduate (in Nursing), Josephine (Jody) Perry, also of the Class of '52.

.Bruce also entered Alfred in 1949 in the College of Liberal Arts and majored in mathematics with preparation for teaching. He and Barden were both members of Klan. They both sang in the choir of the Union University Church, a non-denominational church meeting in the Seventh Day Baptists' building.

Upon graduation in 1953, Bruce married his high school sweetheart, Barbara Holme, and they lived in a Saxon Heights (post war housing for married veterans) apartment for one year while Bruce completed a Master's degree in Education. Barbara worked as a clerk in the University Registrar's office, which was then in the first floor of Kanakadea Hall. According to Frances, who lived to 103, that was the building where Irwin started teaching. He lived to age 89.

The next generation of the family did not become Alfred alumni, although Barden and Jody's daughter, Shelley, attended the University for one year before transferring to a fashion design program at another college.

Barden and Jody's granddaughter, Alexandra Beall, daughter of their daughter Connie and her husband, Greg Beall, attended Alfred also and graduated in 2012.

This is a brief history of one family in the Alfred University's long history. It is an amazing place and never changes in its atmosphere, even when we return there to visit. It was always fascinating to hear details of the lives of the above people in the 1920's and 1930's, especially in terms of modern technical and electrical improvements as they

occurred in society

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PS Years later, Irwin served on various boards of the University as an Alumnus. In 1978, as Barbara and I attended my 25th Reunion, six members of the Class of 1923, including Irwin and John McMahon, had the best time talking about old times.