

IOWA HISTORY



John Gabbert Bowman
(Photo: *The Owl*, U of Pittsburgh)

Iowa Hog Farmer Becomes University President

In 1911 a group of State University of Iowa (University of Iowa) alumni started a petition to oppose the appointment of the new president of the university. John Gabbert Bowman was only 33 years old and was about to become the youngest college president in the country. The alumni petition failed, and Bowman accepted the position in March.

John Gabbert Bowman was born in Davenport in 1877. His grandfathers were lumbermen and early settlers in the state. His dad was a principal of Davenport High School. Bowman worked summers on lumber rafts on the Mississippi River. He completed his education in the Davenport school system, and after graduating from high school he enrolled in the State University of Iowa in Iowa City. His parents could not afford to continue paying for his college so he dropped out after one year.

Bowman took a job as a country school teacher and raised hogs and corn. He made enough to return to his studies at the university. He graduated in 1899. He worked for a time at a Davenport newspaper but eventually moved to Chicago to take a job with a newspaper there. During his spare time he went to college earning a master's degree in 1904. He moved to New York where he did graduate work at Columbia University. In 1906 Andrew Carnegie hired Bowman to become secretary of the Carnegie Foundation.

When Bowman took over the leadership position at the university at Iowa City there were 1,748 students enrolled and 165 instructors on the payroll. The university owned property valued at \$2,275,000.

Bowman, the ninth president, was the first alumni of the university to become its top administrator. He said he would make the university the "Athens of the West" when he took the

position. But Bowman's time at the university was short-lived. He quit after only two years to become director of the American College of Surgeons, (a "hospital improvement society").

In 1921 the University of Pittsburgh hired Iowa's former university president to take over the reins in Pennsylvania. At the time he was the highest paid university president in the nation—with a salary of \$31,000 per year. He served in that position until 1945.

In 1939 *Time* magazine called Bowman the "bossiest" university president in the country. It called him a "dictator" and one of the "most talked-about" educators. The magazine accused him of "highhandedness" and claimed he had fired "liberal teachers right and left." When the university's popular football coach quit because of differences with Bowman, students staged a "boisterous strike" and proclaimed, "We've had enough of this dictatorship."—referring to President Bowman's management skills.

Despite criticism from some, Bowman was credited with overseeing the construction of several architecturally significant buildings at Pittsburgh—including the Cathedral of Learning, the largest educational structure in the Western Hemisphere at the time. He also increased attendance at the university from 2,300 to 23,000 by the time of his retirement.

Not bad for an Iowa boy who worked his way through college as a river rafter and hog farmer!

Sources

"Alumni Oppose Bowman," *New York Times*, Mar 1, 1911.

"Youngest College Head," *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 1911.

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