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EMIL FARKAS AND
WILLIAM RAYMOND DAVIS:
WINDY CITY BOYS



Emily Durkin



IT WAS A CRISP autumn day in the windy city. The year was 1902, and Emil braced himself against the cold Chicago wind as he made his way to civil engineering class at the Armour Institute, thinking that things needed to change. Maybe he needed a change of pace; this city wasn't offering the opportunities he sought. While the Armour Institute was a respected

technical institute, perhaps he needed a place that could offer a more prestigious kind of education. Maybe the city life was not for him. What about a school that was on the verge of growth? What about Purdue University in West Lafayette?

In another part of the city, William Raymond Davis was having thoughts similar to Emil's, but with different motivations. Chicago for him had meant tragedy. Maybe this was the reason he wanted to leave the Chicago Manual Training School.¹ Purdue could be a fresh start, William thought. He could escape the past and start anew.

But would the country boys in West Lafayette accept these city boys?

Purdue University was becoming a renowned institution for its engineering and agricultural programs at the turn of the twentieth century. Through Emil Farkas and William Raymond Davis, both transfer students to Purdue who graduated in 1904, we explore the role of the Chicagoan in a rural setting and the extent to which the rural and urban divide shaped life at the turn of the century. The archival trail of these two young men is almost nonexistent. The legacies of both men remain fragmented and incomplete—ghosts of the past. Their trails ran cold early in my archival research, and the records of their experiences at Purdue

are minimal. Much about their lives is left to speculation at the turn of the twentieth century.

According to Timothy Spears, professor of American Studies at Middlebury College and author of *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871–1919*, “Even today, the lure of the city remains a potent theme in American popular culture; part of a familiar narrative about leaving home and starting over, they also underscore the culture’s abiding faith in the relationship between physical and social mobility, a belief powered, and challenged, by a variety of desires and longings.”² It may have been this sentiment and the opportunities that the city provided that drew Emil’s parents to the United States from Austria in 1889 when Emil was only six years old.³ This move to a new country and learning an entirely new language may have had a severe impact on Emil. At that time, Americans were generally not accepting of immigrants, and they were led to believe immigrants were taking away American jobs and spoiling the American name. Emil and his parents moved to Chicago instead of a rural town, such as West Lafayette, as was commonly the case with immigrants, due to the nature of the rural and urban divide. Chicago had a large German-speaking population at that time, as Spears explains: “Among the city’s older immigrant communities, the Germans were the largest, totaling a quarter of the

entire population.”⁴ While the city was no friendly place for immigrants, the rural setting was far worse. The city needed immigrants to create the cultural melting pot it is today.⁵ Emil’s experiences living in Chicago as an immigrant may have shaped the course of his life. The Chicago immigrant community was overcrowded with poorly constructed housing. The German community in particular seemed to congregate on the near north side of Chicago.⁶ These early experiences may have played a role for Emil in his development and eventual determination to find a better life than the one he was dealt.

On the other hand, William Raymond Davis, a native of Blue Island, Illinois—a suburb of Chicago—had immigrant parents as well, yet his experiences seem to have been starkly different than Emil’s.⁷ William’s archival trail has substantially more information than Emil’s.

William’s parents, William Thomas Davis and Frances Davis, were born and raised in England. According to an 1871 marriage record from Grimsby, England, William Thomas Davis married Frances Reynolds.⁸ The Davises immigrated to Chicago perhaps because of the perceived endless opportunities afforded to those who moved to the city. However, the experience of an English immigrant speaking with an accent was easier than the experience of an

Austrian immigrant incapable of being understood, as he spoke only German. One can only speculate as to how the two young men's lives played out in the various stages of childhood since no archival records exist. It is known that both young men grew up in the ever-changing city of Chicago with many opportunities for advancement. The city could also be a place to lose oneself. Our experiences shape who we are, and William especially experienced much tragedy in his life. It is this tragedy that may have led him to flee Chicago for a "new life" at Purdue University. William experienced the death of his mother at the age of forty-two in 1892, his older brother Walter Davis in 1898, and his brother Fred Davis.⁹ The deaths of these family members may have prompted him to leave the Chicago Manual Training School.¹⁰ While the school was a respected institution, it may not have offered William enough opportunities to advance his career. Purdue was a four-year institution, and to be the best in his field, William may have needed to transfer to pursue better educational standards. The Purdue name may have drawn the city boy to the small-town, land-grant institution of West Lafayette.

While the city of Chicago was booming, the rural setting was also undergoing change. In their study of changing demographics, Daniel Lichter and David

Brown found that “in 1900, more than 60% of Americans lived in rural areas, defined as small towns, the open countryside, and farms.”¹¹ The small-town setting was one where common American ideals, such as hard work and religious morals, flourished. The city was typically viewed as impersonal and immoral. According to issues of the Purdue *Exponent*, students at the University poked fun at rural areas like Kansas and implied that West Lafayette and the greater Purdue community considered itself to have a higher status than such areas. This is evidenced through a 1904 issue of the *Exponent* with an aside that states, “Piano playing is prohibited in Forb Scott, Kansas between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. It interferes with the engagement of the sound made by the corn growing.”¹² However much Purdue students wanted to see themselves as urban and sophisticated, for Chicagoans, West Lafayette must have seemed simple. The struggle between the urban and rural divide is evident in Emil’s senior biographical excerpt, published in the 1904 *Debris*. In Emil’s brief biography, it is implied that Emil could not stop talking about his days at the Armour Institute before transferring to Purdue. Perhaps Emil mentioned the Armour Institute in excess because he missed Chicago and the experiences it offered. Often, the past is idealized, and memories make one nostal-

gic. Emil may have yearned for his years at Armour because of a deep connection he felt with Chicago as his adopted hometown. Spears argues that immigrants felt this way about their original homes: "One marker of provincial migrants' identity in Chicago, nostalgia was a socially constructed emotion that referred primarily to geographic dislocation and the longing for home that followed."¹³ It is possible that "immigrants" to Purdue from Chicago transferred their nostalgia to the city. It can be noted that no matter where one comes from, one will long for home. Emil's longing is duly noted by others in their description of him: "of course he is from Chicago."¹⁴ Transplants from Chicago to Indiana can identify with Emil and his longing for that great Windy City. I can speak to his desire for talking of home and the great opportunities Chicago offers as I am a Chicagoan myself. This repeated mention in Emil's senior *Debris* biography suggests Emil's motivation to transfer to Purdue. While Chicago may have offered many positive experiences and memories of the past, the Purdue name as a large land-grant institution was becoming well-known for its engineering program, which may have been what brought Emil to West Lafayette. What did Emil expect coming to Purdue? Were his expectations based on rural and "farm boy" stereotypes? What was William's motivation to

transfer to Purdue? Was it the growing reputation of Purdue and its engineering program?

While both students have similar trajectories, stark differences exist between them. Emil seemingly disappears while at Purdue. There is only mention of him in a poem regarding the graduating seniors of the class of 1904.¹⁵ Surprisingly, he does have an extended biography in the *Debris* from 1904. Other than this moment in the *Debris*, he appears to leave no trace of himself while at Purdue in terms of his school involvement and active memberships. William, however, took a different path and became involved in the Athletic Association as well as the Mechanical Engineering Society, according to the 1904 *Debris*.¹⁶ William neither fades into the background at Purdue nor stands out strongly. Why did these two young men have such low profiles while at the University? What caused the lack of archival information that suggests such minimal involvement? Their low profiles might be the result of the lack of archival information, or their obscurity might stem from the difficulty of transferring and coming to a class that had already bonded.

It was another windy autumn day in 1903; it was the Windy City boys' senior year. Purdue was bustling with students moving in, greeting old friends, and getting back into the swing of academic life. This

academic year would be marked with traditions, such as the annual tank scrap, and the tragedy of the horrific train wreck.¹⁷ Another commonality that exists between the two young men occurs later in this year. From 1903 to 1904, their senior year at Purdue, each Chicagoan wrote his senior thesis on the topic of Chicago and engineering. According to the 1904 *Debris*, Emil wrote his senior thesis on the tunnel under the Chicago River, and William wrote his on the design of special steel under-framing for Pullman cars that originated in Chicago, which back then was the transportation hub it still is today.¹⁸ This implies that Chicago remained a fascination for both men, despite their transfers to Purdue University.

These men were leading lives with similar trajectories, and it is with these similarities and differences that we can explore the rural and urban divide. In both young men's experiences, which were recorded in excerpts written about them, it appears that they were set apart from other students because they transferred to Purdue from a big city. The question arises as to why the city and rural areas have been in conflict. Are the two areas so ideologically different that they cannot come to accept one another? As Spears argues, "In the starkest of terms, the taboo pleasures of urban culture were opposed to the virtues of rural life."¹⁹ This quote

illustrates the stereotypical differences that divide urban and rural settings. It was believed at the time that the urban setting was filled with squalor and temptation, while the rural setting was filled with rolling fields and strict morality. It may explain why Emil and William could have felt different from the other students while at Purdue.

Both young men went their own ways in life, and there is no evidence that either had any contact with one another while at Purdue University. Both men married and had families, as discovered through census and *Ancestry.com* research. Emil fought for a better life for himself and his family, and he went on to be the father of two sons.²⁰ He fought hard to break out of his status as an immigrant. According to the 1930 US federal census, Emil worked in advertising, and the Farkas family eventually had a servant.²¹ William appears in the Purdue Alumni Directory, while Emil does not.²² William chose to pursue a career as a mechanical engineer and traveled to the West Coast, landing in Douglas, Arizona, to work for numerous railroad and mining companies.²³ The ties between Purdue and Chicago that these two men had still exist today. Many Purdue students travel to the city of Chicago for fun day trips or educational purposes.²⁴ What were the motivational factors for these two young men

to transfer, move back home to the great Windy City, or forge on with their lives elsewhere? One can only speculate, and the circumstances are situational. The Chicago ties and rural connection to Purdue bound these “city boys” together even if they didn’t know it. Emil Farkas and William Raymond Davis offer a snapshot of the Purdue University setting at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as the tensions of the day between rural and urban centers. Despite the fact that the lives of both young men diverged, one thread remains constant: no matter where they went in life, Chicago would always be their home.

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Notes

1. Information about Davis's former institution provided from *Debris*, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.
2. Timothy Spears, *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
3. United States Federal Census, 1920, accessed October 31, 2013, *Ancestry.com*.
4. Spears, *Chicago Dreaming*, 181.
5. Dominic Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 33. According to Pacyga, "Despite the call of Know Nothings, a nativist political movement that spread across the United States, including Chicago in the 1850s, and others for an end to immigration, the city depended on the foreigners who had settled within its borders."
6. Harold Mayer and Richard White, *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 64.
7. *Debris*, 1904.

8. Great Britain marriage record, 1827, accessed October 31, 2013, *Ancestry.com*. Information obtained through the process of elimination through *Ancestry.com*.

9. United States Federal Censuses, 1890-1910, accessed October 31, 2013, *Ancestry.com*.

10. According to the University of Chicago archival records, it was an academic and vocational institute for young men of high school age to explore the technical field of engineering. In the year 1903, the Training School became a part of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. Guide to the Chicago Manual Training Records. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, 1882-1913.

11. Daniel Lichter and David Brown, "Rural America in an Urban Society: Changing Spatial and Social Boundaries," *Annual Review of Sociology* 566, no. 37 (2011).

12. J. Clyde Marcus, "A Note from Kansas," *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Sept. 16, 1903.

13. Spears, *Chicago Dreaming*, 77.

14. *Debris*, 1904.

15. This is an excerpt from a poem in the 1904 *Debris* regarding the class of 1904: "At the dime museum on Fifth Street the barker was expatiating on the wonderful characteristics of the devilfish.

'The devilfish has ten mouths,' he bawled, and pointing to Farkas, continued, 'But he doesn't make half as much noise with all ten of 'em as our fuzzy friend yonder does with his one.'" *Ibid.*, 15.

16. *Debris*, 1904.

17. *Ibid.*, 15. Purdue University students experienced a tragic train crash on the way to the Indiana University versus Purdue football game in Indianapolis. The crash involved train cars carrying Purdue faculty, students, the football team, and band.

18. *Debris*, 1904.

19. Spears, *Chicago Dreaming*, 20.

20. Due to Emil's hard work and forging his way for a better life, one of his sons was able to become a musician. United States Federal Census, 1940, accessed October, 19, 2013, *Ancestry.com*.

21. United States Federal Census Bureau, 1930.

22. The Purdue Alumni Directory is a self-reporting directory of Purdue alumni.

23. Purdue Alumni Directory, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, IN, 1875-1934.

24. As illustrated in Leah R. Miller's 1920s scrapbook, Chicago was still a place of wonder and exploration. Leah and her friends visited the city of Chicago for a home economics inspection trip during the 1920s. She illustrated her trip in her scrapbook with clippings of Chicago landmarks and even the letterhead from the hotel where she stayed.

