



**H**ad Eugene Field ever reached the status of senior, his class prediction might well have been that he would either end up in jail or become a famous comedian. Instead, Field, who attended the University 100 years ago, has been immortalized as an emotional, sentimental children's poet through such works as "Little Boy Blue" and "Wynken, Blynken and Nod."

Missouri was the third college Field attended. His freshman year was spent at Williams College, the next at Knox. In 1870 he enrolled at Mizzou and spent two years here as a junior, along with his brother, Roswell M. Field. His years in Columbia comprised his final formal education before taking off for Europe and a fling at acting prior to settling down to newspaper work.

Despite the many schools Eugene attended, none of them apparently had a settling effect on the

irrepressible prankster. Music and fun occupied more of his time in Columbia than writing. He originated most of the entertainment programs at the University, and he wanted to start a dramatic group. He was noted for his singing, and his clear tenor voice was often heard over Lake St. Mary, located on campus, as he drifted in a boat singing and strumming his guitar.

Serenading was a favorite pastime, especially since it was strictly forbidden at Christian and Stephens Colleges. Naturally, Field spent a good deal of time singing under girls' windows, particularly at Stephens where the president was hard of hearing.

All of Field's fun was not derived from such innocent preoccupations, however. He was the ring-leader of 60 students who broke into wine cellars located under old Academic Hall and was brought



## Centennial for a Field Day

By Betty Brophy



The campus of 1870 (opposite page) was a playground for the prankster, Eugene Field, above. At left is his favorite victim, President Read.

before the faculty.

Later, he was arrested for disturbing the peace by wild pranks and brought before the town recorder, C. P. Anderson. A seven-day trial ensued at which Field pleaded so eloquently he and his companions were all acquitted.

Although he was always in hot water with the faculty, Field was most popular with the students for his sense of humor, particularly with the young women. And Eugene was not the type to let his rivals get ahead of him in the courting department.

As North Todd Gentry recalled in an article by Sara Lockwood in a 1927 edition of the *Kansas City Journal-Post*, "Field and a boy named Richardson were to escort two young women to a party. They both desired to accompany the elder and prettier of the two. Richardson not only got ahead of Field in the matter of the desired partner, but he also beat Field to the livery stable and hired the only handsome turnout the place afforded.

"Field, however, was not wholly outdone. If he could not have the girl of his choice, he could at least have the handsome team. He gravely explained to the unsuspecting liveryman that he had talked the proposed ride over with Richardson and the latter had consented to exchange rigs with him.

"The liveryman allowed Field to take the best horses and Richardson had to put up with the plugs."

University President Daniel Read, whose daughter Mary occasionally dated Eugene, suffered more at the expense of Field's pranks than any other Columbian. The most often related story about the two concerns the president's favorite carriage horse in which he took a great deal of pride. He was less than proud, however, after Eugene shaved the horse's tail and mane. The next day Field donned a disguise and presented himself as a prospective buyer for the president's "old gray mule."

Obviously pleased with the success of this stunt, the student white-washed another of the president's horses which Read mistook for a stray and had removed from his property.

If the president's nerves were not shattered by that experience, surely they were after the infamous gunpowder plot. Field and his cohorts picked a cloudy night to pour a circle of powder around

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Read's door. The prankster knocked and Read came out with a lantern. As he peered into the darkness to see who was calling, the boys touched a match to the powder and the dignified educator was surrounded by a ring of fire.

Despite the aggravation he caused the administration, Field did not always get the punishment his actions merited. As Colonel

W. F. Switzler related, "He had little standing among members of the faculty. These staid dignitaries, however, did not criticize him much openly for he was likely to retaliate in satirical verse. President Read, I remember, was once the recipient of much attention when that good old man ventured to criticize "Gene's doings. This poem is said to be the first Field ever wrote" (see next page).

Although they never distinguished themselves as students at Ol' Mizzou, E.W. Stephens once said of the Field boys, "Two brighter men, or men who have earned wider reputation in the field of letters, have never attended the University. . . . But neither ever studied very hard. They were unusually brilliant men."

The greatest honor bestowed upon Field during his stay in Columbia was the 1872 oratory prize, during a period when oratory was more popular than sports. It is no surprise that he was talented in that field, however, since his father was a famous lawyer who was once counsel to Dred Scott in the slave case that helped instigate the Civil War.

Like their father, both Field boys were excellent classical students, and they jointly wrote a translation of Horace which Latin scholars long considered one of the finest translations.

Mathematics, though, was another story, for both Roswell and Eugene failed the subject.

"It was a matter of principle with us," Roswell said in later years when he returned to campus. "Neither Eugene nor I cared for mathematics and this acted as a bar to our graduation, for in those days no degrees were conferred upon students who did not master the full mathematical course."

The lack of a degree did not hinder Eugene in his career, as evidenced by his fame. After his jaunt to Europe, he returned and married 16-year-old Julia Comstock of St. Joseph, sister of a University friend. He was first a reporter for the *St.*

## VINUM ET PUERI

*Louis Evening Journal* and then editor for the *St. Joseph Gazette*. Later he was an editorial writer on the *St. Louis Times-Journal*, and it was then he began writing poetry in earnest.

In 1883, after managing the *Kansas City Times* and the *Denver Tribune*, he joined the staff of the *Chicago Daily News*, where he dedicated himself to writing a column, "Sharps and Flats," for which he was world-renowned.

Field died at the early age of 45, leaving his wife and eight children. For years after his death, well into the 20th century, grade schools celebrated Eugene Field Day as a tribute to the great children's poet.

Yet Columbians who knew him remembered the tall gangling youth who smoked a corncob pipe and always had an endless store of gags and pranks on hand. As Colonel Switzler said, "As a boy, 'Gene was hardly a model for rising generations, but he turned out all right in spite of his early shortcomings."

Apparently Field, being a true sentimentalist, retained a fondness for Columbia and the people who had tolerated his mischievousness. In an 1884 letter to Mrs. Pamela Royall, Roswell's ex-landlady, Field wrote, "I take for granted that you feel an interest in me, for it seems to me that you and the other good people of Columbia should consider me one of the Columbia boys. Believe me, I always have had and always will have a large corner in my heart for the dear old town and its generous, hospitable, courtly people." □



Unus March nox, cum Doctor D—  
Jacet in lectum peacefully.  
Existimat audire noise  
Vemens (veniens?) ab damnatis boys.  
Ille dixit, "Duterturbo,  
Et Statim ab sacculum go."  
Non sooner dixit quam 'twas done,  
In vaim daret on the run.  
Sed primus at Josephus' door,  
He stops et rap, et—nothing more.  
Josephus, too, in lectum lay,  
Et planned up problems ad next day,  
Et lost in meditatio deep.  
Tamenque tired, could non sleep.  
Cum suddenly a magnum sound,  
Roused illum ab his thoughts profound:  
A vox outside was heard to say,  
"Come care Joseph, sans delay!"  
Id was the Doctor's vox he heard  
Et so he dressed sans nary word.  
Et cum he ab the fares came,  
He heard the doctor loud exclaim,  
"Oh age, age! dear old *faller*,  
Damnati boys sunt in the cellar!  
Et ere nos know id, they'll have drank,  
The vinum ex the vinum tank!"  
"Yes, we'll away et spoil hoc fun  
Et catch the rogues ere they're begunt  
If I can't flunk 'em at their tasks,  
Ego will flunk 'em at the casks!  
Et nos will vero mimo see,  
Si they can fool geometree."  
Ita the duo make their way,  
Ad vinum cellar sans delay.  
The Doctor stands outside the door,  
Audiet young kits in a war.  
Says one, whose nomen I'll not state,  
"If Doc come here I'll break his pate!"  
Com lol the door was opened wide,  
The Doc was seen, and by his side,  
Sat carus Joseph, full of glee.  
Et in his hand geometree.  
Magnus deus, how the boys  
Cessarunt ex their drink et noise!  
Et unus Senior, on his knees,  
Cries, "Doctor, let me go, sir, si tu please."  
A Junior dixit in contrition,  
"Don't keep me off from exhibition."  
A Sophomore, wild and in despair,  
Describes triangles in the air.  
Cum, care Joseph cries with glee,  
"State problem tenth, from Liber three."  
The frightened pueri all crowd  
Around the Doctor, who, aloud,  
Proclaims ut he will have to see,  
Them ranged before the faculty.  
Sed gloria to that faculty,  
Doctor cavet, pueri, free.

*Ager Primus*

"Wine and Boys," above, supposedly Field's first poem, followed the wine cellar episode. Read (Doctor D—), awakened by the noise, joined math professor Joseph Ficklin in catching the offenders in the act. No severe action was taken.