A different breed of cat

In June 1889, when Dave Ross finished high school in Brookston, he wanted to go to college. However, his father, George Ross, considered college a waste of time. George Ross was not alone. Indiana Governor James D. “Blue Jeans” Williams once had chilled a college crowd when he opened a commencement speech by opining “eddycate a boy and he won’t work!”

George Ross felt the same way. He insisted that Dave learn something practical. Dave had engineering in mind. Wasn’t that practical? He wanted to go down to the Wabash River town known for years as Chauncey but renamed West Lafayette in 1888. There the teenaged Purdue University campus still struggled for permanence.

In 1889, Purdue amounted to eight buildings out in a field. The courses included agriculture and three forms of engineering—mechanical, civil, and electrical. In the debate with George Ross, Dave’s Uncle Will, took Dave’s side. Uncle Will offered to let Dave stay in his Lafayette home and walk a daily mile over to Purdue. It would save Dave and Dave’s father about two dollars and fifty cents per week on room and board costs at Purdue. Uncle Will further offered to pay for Dave’s tuition and books. With this much help, Dave’s entire four-year Purdue education might cost George Ross no more than a hundred dollars.

Still, Brookston tongues wagged that Dave and George Ross quarreled over college. Some sided with George and hoped that the boy was not making a mistake. Uncle Will met Dave at the train station after the ride from Brookston. Some of Uncle Will’s and
(Will’s sister) Aunt Eleanor’s Ninth Street Hill neighbors came by the house to wish Dave well. Purdue enrollment stood at four hundred sixty-some at the time.

It soon became obvious that, as another farm boy at Purdue, Dave Ross was going to be different from George Ade. Dave Ross was going to be “another breed of cat” as they said in rural Indiana. With his deep-set hazel eyes, thick, dark hair, and overhanging eyebrows, Dave was a serious looking lad. Lonely as he had always seemed, he still could smile. However, he was and would be no joke-spinning backslapper, no leader of dorm-party songs. Living with Uncle Will and Aunt Eleanor enabled Dave and his parents to save money but caused the boy to miss campus life and the friendships of which George Ade sang in his essay on “Education By Contact.” George Ade had come to know his dorm mates by name in a day or two. Dave Ross had no such opportunity. George Ade became a Sigma Chi. No one invited Dave Ross.

Unlike so many country boys at Purdue, Dave was not powerfully built, either, and showed no talent for sports. He gravitated toward quiet boys like himself who preferred the background. Dave carried his lunch to Purdue, wrapped in newspaper by Aunt Eleanor. He ate with fellows from the country. One of them, Jack Kneale, rode in on horseback from a farm eight miles away. Kneale started studying electrical engineering but switched to pharmacy.

“Think of all the things they’ll be doing with electricity,” Dave said.

“I know,” Kneale nodded, “but electric power will be controlled by big companies. I want to be in business for myself. I’ll never own an electric street railway, a lighting plant or phone company, but I might own a pharmacy.”

That sort of talk set Dave to thinking ahead. He, too, liked the thought of being in business for himself. Another event kept him thinking that way. It was an inspirational lecture titled “Acres of Diamonds” uttered by a Philadelphia minister, Russell Conwell. Conwell preached at Purdue about the sheer folly of people thinking that opportunities only exist far away. He cited many men who had struck it rich almost in their own back yard, saying:
To be great at all, one must be great right here, now, in your own town. He who can give his city better streets and better sidewalks, better schools or colleges, more happiness and more civilization, he will be great anywhere. If you wish to be great, you must begin where you are, and as you are, right here, now. (Kelly, Ross, 28-29)

Dave remembered the lecture and the lesson. At Purdue, he made weak grades in subjects in which he would later excel. He barely passed Machine Design, yet even then showed talent for picturing complex machines in detail before drawing them. He made average Mechanical Drawing grades, too. But Dave’s was a questioning personality and inquisitive mind. There was a growing tradition at Purdue for the undergraduates to try to “kidnap” the senior class president and keep him from going to his class’s annual banquet. However, when Dave was invited to help in a kidnap he asked, “Why don’t we want them to hold their banquet?” No one knew why.

Ross enrolled in an optional special course in civil engineering. Occasionally, as the class experimented, he would ask, “Why is it done this way?” The everyday student accepted the way things were always done without asking why. Dave’s was one of the minds that thought that school and college success depended too much on the ability to be a clerk and neatly write down facts, ideas, or opinions from the teacher. Dave was poor clerk material, poor at recording what a teacher dictated.

In the first semester of Dave’s freshman year, Purdue’s newly revived football team coached by G. A. Reisner played three games. In its first home game ever—on a YMCA field in Lafayette—Purdue’s team defeated DePauw thirty-four to ten. At Crawfordsville, Purdue defeated Wabash College eighteen to four but lost its finale at Butler fourteen to nothing in Indianapolis. A bitter Crawfordsville newspaper accused Reisner of recruiting non-students—
muscular policemen and boilermakers from Lafayette’s railroads—in order to beat Wabash. The “Boilermakers” nickname stuck with Purdue teams.

In February 1890, Purdue opened its Electrical Engineering building. In July, federal census takers counted 35,078 people in Tippecanoe County, 16,243 in Lafayette, and 1,242 in West Lafayette.

In the autumn of Dave’s sophomore year, the football team won two home games against Wabash and Illinois, and one game in Greencastle against DePauw, but lost other road games against Chicago, Michigan, and Butler. C. L. Hare coached the “Boilermakers” who scored an average of approximately twenty-eight points per game and held foes to about nine. Interest in football increased. One could tell by the size of the “home” crowds at the field in Lafayette.

By the end of April 1891, several of Dave Ross’s closest kin embarked on a business venture. They platted high quality home sites on their partner James Reynolds’s rolling pasture south of Lafayette’s Kossuth Street. Their Highland Park Land Company filed articles of incorporation and raised twenty-one thousand dollars for working capital by selling 420 shares of stock at fifty dollars apiece. The stockholders included Reynolds, Dave’s father George Ross, Dave’s Uncle Will, Uncle Linn, and Uncle Linn’s wife Lydia. For years, Uncle Will and Uncle Linn had saved their money while farming in White County. Reynolds, Will, and Linn were the Land Company’s first directors. They took their time about planning, grading, piping, pouring concrete sidewalks, and paving streets in the once-pastoral acreage.

On November 14, 1891, teams from Purdue and Indiana played their first intercollegiate football game in West Lafayette. The event attracted twelve hundred spectators. Purdue led sixty to nothing when officials suspended play. To the delight of the growing numbers of football fans, new coach Knowlton “Snake” Ames’s first
Purdue team won all four of its 1891 games against Wabash, DePauw, Indiana, and Butler. The team scored 192 points and held all four foes scoreless. As Purdue success and football popularity soared, a movement began to wave goodbye to Lafayette’s YMCA field and put up a permanent set of bleachers and other amenities on the West Lafayette campus. Purdue opened such a venue and named it Stuart Field in 1892.

The birth of Stuart Field was preceded by what might be termed a battle of The Old versus The New with Agriculture on one side and Athletics on the other...Then came recognition of the demand by patrons that athletic and physical training be afforded students by public institutions.

This was the state of affairs in 1891: a football team had no regular place to play. Athletes and their supporters cast longing eyes at a plot of ground at the north end of the campus used as an agricultural experiment ground. Wheat experiments were being conducted on the plot at the time, and those in charge objected to such sacrilegious use of the ground as the students proposed. The continuity of valuable wheat experiments cannot and must not be disturbed, they said.

Students petitioned the university board of trustees that a part of the campus be set aside for athletic purposes. Whereupon the trustees complied and voted to set aside a plot of eight acres north of the campus proper to be used as an athletic field. Thus a wheat field became an athletic field and Stuart Field was born.

The trustees designated that the plot be known as Stuart Field in honor of the president of the board, Lafayette attorney Charles B. Stuart.
Work was completed on April 15, 1892. The field was dedicated the following day by a baseball game with Butler College. The field...did much to stimulate athletic activities at the university. In 1892 with funds derived from athletic fees, the Athletic Association constructed bleachers capable of seating about 800 persons. In 1898 the sophomore class provided a running track. The Class of 1898 donated upwards of $500 [for] a covered pavilion for the athletic field. This pavilion, seating about 600, was built in 1899. (Lafayette Journal and Courier, November 20, 1924)

Meanwhile, the men behind the Highand Park Land Company either had inside information or guessed right, because their investment benefited from a go-after-it spirit sweeping Lafayette. The results unfolded in a breathtaking sequence.

In the middle of June 1892, the Monon Railroad—crossing Indiana from Lake Michigan to the Ohio River—agreed to build maintenance and repair shops at a site off North Twenty-Second Street in Lafayette. The projected Monon Shops would employ up to one thousand men skilled in assorted mechanical trades and numerous boilermakers. The Shops would open with six hundred employees making an average of two dollars per day.

For the Land Company, this meant a boost in potential new homebuyers.

And there was more. In mid-June 1892, a Grand Army of the Republic committee met at Indianapolis and considered bids from Muncie, Warsaw, Cartersburg, and Tippecanoe County for the construction of an Indiana State Soldiers’ Home. The committee’s aim was to serve the aging and disabled Civil War veterans. Tippecanoe County won again.

These summer developments touched off boom conditions. The concept of “give in order to get” took hold. In the three years since natural gas service had begun and the Belt Railway had opened, seven factories had chosen Lafayette.

In October 1892, several events marked the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ voyage of discovery. School
programs, flag drills, and band concerts added to the festive season. The joy spilled over to Purdue. On November 1, Amos Heavilon, a Purdue alumnus who farmed in Clinton County, Indiana, gave Purdue land and notes worth thirty-five thousand dollars. Heavilon meant for his gift—the largest since founder John Purdue’s one hundred thousand dollars and one hundred acres—to enlarge mechanical engineering shops, labs, and classroom space.

And during October and November 1892, Coach Ames led the Purdue football team to another undefeated season and a mythical “national championship.” Playing at Stuart Field, the “Boilermakers” defeated Wisconsin, Michigan, Butler, Indiana, and Chicago and won road games against Illinois, Wabash, and DePauw.

In his senior year, one of Dave Ross’s teachers proved to have special and far-reaching influence. He was Professor Reginald Fessenden, once an assistant to Thomas Edison. Fessenden headed Purdue’s Department of Electrical Engineering and Physics and became a noted radio industry pioneer. However, he came off to many at 1890s Purdue as an absent-minded “character.” They thought him crazy, at age twenty-seven, for predicting that one day a German would learn to take photographs through a wall, but Professor Wilhelm Konrad Roentgen, in his X-ray work, did so two years later. A decade before the Wright Brothers, Fessenden envisioned that one day men would fly. Classmates regarded Ross as strange because of his serious talks with Fessenden, but Ross liked Fessenden because Fessenden taught as an equal, not as an elite or superior professor.

On April 1, 1893—two months before Ross graduated from Purdue—the Highland Park Land Company put on sale 136 building sites between Owen and Kossuth streets west of Ninth. Highland Park would offer buyers paved streets and avenues bearing the names Central, Pontiac, Highland, and Shawnee, along with concrete sidewalks, storm sewers, shade trees, electric power, and purified, pressurized city water delivered to the homes in pipes.
The Company added twenty-eight lots during 1893. Lot prices more than tripled in three years.

Dave Ross finished Purdue in June 1893, receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering. Of forty-one engineers in the Class of 1893, he ranked in the middle. He served as corresponding secretary of his class and as business manager for a Purdue yearbook called the Debris. The student newspaper, in a series of senior class prophesies, predicted “Ross will electrify Brookston.”

Ross survived typhoid fever instead. Dr. O’Ferrall (the younger, better educated doctor) prescribed outdoor, open-air work to speed Dave’s recovery. With no post-graduate plans and no job offers, Dave regarded farm work as sensible a next step as any.