

Letters of a Pioneer Teacher

Arozina Perkins, a pioneer Iowa teacher, came west in the fall of 1849. Three months later she wrote to her brother, Barnabas, in Hartford, Connecticut, describing the little town of Fort Des Moines and the select school which she taught in the old Methodist Church on Fifth Street. A letter the following year informed him that she had removed to Fairfield to teach in a seminary there.

They are especially interesting for her comments on the rude educational facilities of the day, the efforts to organize the first school district at Fort Des Moines, and the personal problems that beset a teacher on the Iowa frontier. Extracts from two of Miss Perkins' original letters are printed through the courtesy of Mr. Woodrow W. Westholm, editor of the Iowa Postal History *Bulletin*.

Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Jan. 2, 1850.

My dear Brother,

. . . We have some of the most sweeping blasts here that you ever felt. The winds come all the way from the Rocky Mountains, and as there is nothing to break them here we have fresh breezes every day. This town is at the juncture of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. It is mostly a level prairie with a few swells or hills around it. We have a Court House of brick, and one church, a plain framed building belonging to the Methodists. There are two taverns here, one of which has a most important little bell that rings together some fifty boarders. I cannot tell you how many dwellings there are, for I have not counted them; some are of logs, some of brick, some framed and some are the remains of the old dragoon houses. There are seldom more than one or two rooms in them, rarely three, and all on one floor. We have streets as they do in other cities. I have learned the names of few of them yet. They are numbered from the river up, a la Cincinnati. Then there is a Walnut, a Main Street, etc. etc. and a Coon row. The people support two papers and there are several dry goods shops. I have been into but four of them. They keep "calicoes" in plenty, one piece that I asked the price of was fifty cents per yard. Then there is a variety of fringes, gimps, tassals, et. which are laid by at the East, brought here for sale.—Society is as various as the buildings are. There are people from nearly every state, and Dutch, Swedes, etc. I am boarding in a family from Missouri. There is the man, woman, and two children which latter I have as scholars. There are three rooms, one of which, the parlor, I occupy. Shall I describe it to you? Well, in one corner stands a bed, in another a table covered with books, a clock and my accordion, be-

tween the two windows, under the looking glass is a stand—no—I happen to have it pulled out by the stove just now, to write on. Behind me is a sofa, and beneath a carpet. My two trunks are part of the furniture, and my rough box which I obtained so quickly in my hurry at Hartford is under the bed, with my go-to-meeting bonnets in it. Mr. Everley has a great taste for pictures for the walls are hung with them. I have just been up to see what they are—a portrait of Martin Van Buren and James Madison, hangs just opposite my bed. I happened to notice another very particularly, 'tis of Paul and Virginia in a most tender parting scene, a declaration of independence, a mother washing her hopeful son Saturday night and another. This is a very fine pious family, and I enjoy myself very much. Mr. E. spends most of his time reading and Mrs. E. just minds her own business, as every woman ought to. The diet too just suits me, for we have plenty of corn bread, mush, and milk.—But my school—Well I am teaching in the Methodist Church as there is but one school house here, and that is occupied by Mrs. Bird, wife of the Presbyterian minister here. He preaches at the Court House two sabbaths in the month. Mrs. B. owns the school house, and has a school of about 30. The people tried to have a district school at the Court House but failed. One of the trustees, a shrewd Yankee by the name of Young, hired himself and commenced, taught two weeks then was unhoused, as the other two trustees determined to have a school on a cheaper plan than he could afford. They procured a teacher—examined him—and he proved an ignoramus—then they obtained another—little better than the first, gave him a certificate which Mr. Y. refused to sign as he did not consider him competent to teach the youth of Fort Des Moines. Of course then it was not a legal one here, but the man kept four weeks, when they called a school meeting for the half dozenth time and decided that it was not a public school. It is still going on however, but I have nearly all the girls. I commenced on my own hook, thinking it would be better than to depend upon others. Mr. Stevens had closed his school when I came here, and things looked dark and snarled up to me I can tell you. I had made up my mind to “want for everything while I remained here” except—a school. That I had no idea would be lacking. No one here knew or cared anything about Gov. Slade’s Society, and some of Mrs. Bird’s friends supposed that I was got here to oppose her school. They are beginning to get undeceived by this time. The first day I had nine scholars, now I have 25 and expect more. They are mostly girls of about 13-16. It would have amused you to have seen me the first morning in that shell of a church in the centre of a broad, open space of prairie. Judge McKay was building a fire in a tall, queer stove, and I, after sweeping out, sat down to wait for scholars. I was amused. Well, the first two weeks I made out to live merely. I used coal, and the dirty stuff filled the room with gas and left us half frozen. Half the scholars had the chills every other day, and were first yawning, then shaking, and it almost made me shake to see them. We revolved about that apology for a stove regularly every day; and regularly every night I wrote letters and read sermons to prevent being most heartily

discouraged. I was determined to like here tho' every one of my toes were frosted if there was a prospect of doing any good. One night I dreamed I saw a beautiful, bright star and the next morning I went along to school when, lo, there stood a large wood stove! You need not laugh now—for I never was more rejoiced—not for a long time.—Since then I have kept pretty comfortable. I shall now think it best to remain thro the winter, perhaps longer. . . .

I'll tell you about our Christmas. At the tavern where the bell is they had a something in the evening. Some say it was a dinner, others a supper, while others call it a ball. About fifty were there. As a compliment, of course it could be nothing else, as it must have been known that I would not go. I received an invitation, printed in due form, as a "Cotillion party." Well, that passed off, and friday evening I had another invitation to visit with a very pleasant family. A few ladies and gentlemen were present, and we had a fine time making molasses candy.

Shall I tell you how nicely I commenced the New Year? I made half a dozen calls, wrote a long letter to a friend, and in the evening went to a prayer meeting. The morning I commenced by opening to a hymn as we used to do at home. Today I went to school, found no fire, began to make one, and had the misfortune to tip the stove over; down it came pipe and all; but we got it set up again, and went on as usual. How finely I began, didn't I? Well I do not intend to tip the stove over every morning for it would be too much trouble, and cease to be a variety.

My health is very good except a cold which I took getting initiated. It has kept me coughing much of the time, but will wear away in time.

. . . The great excitement here is about getting the Capital located here. Whether they will succeed or not, I will not pretend to say.

Arozina

Fairfield, Iowa, May 20, 1851

My dear Brother,

. . . I had become discouraged completely—no, I saw, or tho't I saw, that it would be better for me to go to some older town, and wait for young ladies and children to grow there. Therefore C. McK. wrote to know if Mr. Bill wished another teacher at his Seminary. His answer was that the condition of the school would not justify the employment of another at present. I then wrote to Mr. B. merely mentioning a few things I could teach, and requesting him if he knew of any situation where I might be useful to inform me. He then wrote me immediately that matters had so turned about that he wished me to come on. This was quite unexpected as I had not the least idea when I wrote to him that he would want me, judging from his letter to Mr. McK. Whether it was the style of the letter that interested him, (for I do not always write carelessly) or sympathy for my unpleasant situation, that caused this decision, I am unable to say; and as he wished an answer by return of mail I wrote that I would go. Afterwards, however, matters at the

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.