

## LITERARY SOCIETIES

By **Oneita Fisher**  
**West Chester, Iowa**

Kairo, Karo, Kero, Kie,  
    Quisque imus victori,  
Zip! Boom! Lah! Wah!  
Hoo, rah, rah, rah,  
    ya, ya, ya,  
Vive la Aurora.

This strange chant was the official yell of the Aurora Literary Society, one of two that flourished at the Washington (Iowa) Academy between 1873 and 1910.

Literary societies were extensions of higher education, probably growing out of conversational "soirees" with their discussions of literature and current events. Their avowed purpose was to foster forensic or elocutionary ability, but there was also a lighter side which provided entertainment at a time when cultural diversions were, of necessity, "home grown."

Judging by early newspaper accounts, every school, large or small, supported at least one literary society at some time prior to 1910. While this account deals mainly with those in Washington County, as being representative of the state, the societies were not limited to any particular area. Between 1854 and 1862, Washington College—which preceded the Academy—had two literary societies, the Philo and the Erodolphian. A printed program gives these "Exercises" for their first annual contest in 1859:

Address to the Citizens of the U.S.A.  
Polygamy  
The Connection between Human and Divine Government  
The Death Knell of Peace in Our Union  
Original essays, The Sublime and the Infinite  
The Characteristics of Pride

Musical numbers were included to lighten a program that seemed heavy by today's standards, but these "exercises" were merely the prologue to the most important part of the evening—the Debate. The topic for this particular evening in 1859 was, "Can Congress Abolish Slavery in the United States Without Infringing the Constitution?"

The programs were not always entirely serious. The *Washington Gazette* (November 1874) printed this comment about a meeting: "The literary part of the evening was a regular old 'sneezer.' By the way, how delightful to have the floor of a public building well sprinkled with Cayenne pepper."

College literary society activities were meant to be serious "exercises in elocution." The 1868-69 catalogue from Iowa College at Grinnell (on file with the State Historical Society of Iowa) lists three societies—the Chrestomathian, the Philologian, and the Society of Christian Inquiry. All were collecting libraries; the Chrestomathian had 600 volumes, and offered "literary" courses which lasted five years and were brought into "constant and severe requisitions." The Zetathian Society was organized on the University campus in 1861. In addition to forensics, it offered declamations, essays, recitations and readings, the colloquy, one act plays, and original orations.

The 1855 Scheme or outline of the Female Eclectic Institute at Davenport (also in the files of the State Historical Society) emphasized the importance of "an elegant and forcible style" of expression, both in writing and in conversation. "By no other means can the young woman of culture transmit her observations and experience, thoughts and imagery, to future generations."

Plans for new educational facilities often included space for literary meetings in their design. When the Washington Academy was built in 1874, two rooms on the second floor were designated literary halls. The existing Society, the Aurora, was divided; the sister Society was called Magnet, for "drawing power." The newly formed Magnet immediately announced plans "to entertain the citizens of Washington this Thursday in the Academy Chapel. The program will include

songs, tableaux, charades, etc." Proceeds were to be used for "fitting up the new hall"—described as "an elegant place for literary development." Rivalry between the societies was beneficial, according to the Editor of the *Washington Gazette*. He called a forthcoming Aurora-Magnet contest "a locking of horns, something we haven't had for several years and this trial of strength will be enjoyed." (The Aurora won the contest,  $5\frac{1}{3}$  to  $4\frac{2}{3}$  for the Magnets.)

Rivalry was of a friendly nature, however, and together the Aurora and Magnet published the *Acamedian*, later changed to the *Academian*. All students were supposed to belong to one or the other society, but they apparently were lax in attendance. The *Academian's* editor wrote:

"The literary societies have improved wonderfully under the new rule which compels every student to be a member of one of the societies, and it is to be hoped that the rule will be more rigidly enforced in the future. While the greater part of the students are already members, there are quite a few who have not yet evinced any inclination to become so, and they have not been compelled to obey the rule. This seeming partiality to a few is naturally productive of some discontent among the students who have joined because they understood that it was compulsory, and who rightly think that no favors should be shown in the matter. Justice and impartiality require that the rule be rigidly enforced, or else dropped altogether, and we hope that the management will see fit to do one or the other in the near future."

Later, he lamented the fact that faculty members seldom attended. "The faculty," said the editor, "seems to have forgotten about that compulsory society-work."

As audiences became more sophisticated, the societies sponsored lecture courses, bringing in outside talent. Many well-known names appeared on these programs: Booker T. Washington, Susan B. Anthony, Lew Wallace, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, to name a few who came to Washington. Roberts Harper, from London (1891), gave a lecture illustrated with calcium lights. The account says, "He produces night and day, moonlight and sunlight, sunrise and sunset, storms at sea and beautiful scenery, in a manner which is a wonder of modern times." In February, 1896, Russell Conwell "entertained a fair audience for  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours with his unique lecture, 'Acres of Diamonds'."

The meetings traditionally were held during the "slack" months—after the corn was shucked, and before "spring work" began. Bad weather often determined whether or not a lecture course was successful. At West Chester (March 10, 1915) "only a handful" attended a literary program in the United Presbyterian church basement. The correspondent lamented, "We went behind. You couldn't expect country people to come when the roads are so bad." Nineteen members had to pay out \$1.15 each, in order to pay the speaker.

College and academy societies cultivated the ability to speak before an audience. Books were published to instruct the speaker; diplomas were awarded on the successful completion of courses in elocution.



Diploma from the Magnet Literary Society

*The Peerless Reciter*, published in 1894, gives rules for Expression, Emphasis, Pauses, and Gestures. Outline drawings show the actors which gestures to use to express Silence, Secrecy, Meditation, Indecision, Gladness, Defiance, Remorse, Wonderment, Anguish, Repulsion, Exaltation, and so on.

Many a budding Thespian practiced these gestures in the seclusion of his bedroom but at least one young man rehearsed his speeches in the timber near his home, to the amusement of eavesdropping neighbors.



*Photo from Elocution*

**Photograph Shows Improper and  
Proper Positions for Thespians**

College societies limited their membership to students, but "literary" in rural districts included everybody—from the lisping five year old who gave the "welcome" to Grandpa, who often was an excellent debator. Sometimes a family walked a mile or two across fields, with Father carrying one of the younger children and Mother toting the baby. Under such circumstances, the programs had appeal to all ages. The memorized declamations were highly dramatic or amusing, and required many hours of practice before the big night.

In the choice of recitations there was indeed something for everybody. Certain selections were perennial favorites, like Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight; The Soldier's Pardon; Casey at the Bat; Papa's Letter; Anabelle Lee; Whistling in Heaven; Little Boy Blue; or What To Do With a Watermelon.

## WHAT TO DO WITH A WATERMELON

When you thump it with your fingers and it gives a heavy sound,  
Like summer rain a-fallin' on the dry an' dusty ground;  
Jes' get your Barlow ready and prepare to make a swipe,  
And carve it straight an' steady, till it opens red an' ripe!  
Then fold your Barlow careful, an' take your melon flat:  
Put one-half on this side o' you, the other half on that;  
Then, take the biggest in your lap an' tear the heart out, so!  
An' smack your lips an' praise the Lord from whom all blessin's flow!

Program material came from many sources. Each of the several editions of *100 Choice Selections* edited by Phineas Garrett as early as the 1860's, was a "repository of Readings, Recitations and Plays" of "eloquence and sentiment, pathos and humor, dialect and impersonations, farces and dialogues, temperance effusions, etc." (There were at least 37 such collections.)

*The Speaker* was another publication devoted to "literary" material and popular magazines featured suitable numbers. *The Ladies' Home Journal* for March 1903 devoted a full page to James Whitcomb Riley's four new poems: *The Young Old Man*; *The Toy-Balloon*; *Almost Beyond Endurance*; and *The Lisper*. They undoubtedly found their way into many literary programs.

One rural society with a long history was the Verdi Literary Society which met at Memorial Miller school (established 1863) between Washington and Brighton. Later it was known as the Walnut Literary Society, and Mrs. Otto Walton of Washington was a member. She was the Society's secretary in 1907-08 and has preserved the minutes of their meetings. Roberts Rules of Order were "strictly enforced." Sometimes "business" became so complicated that a motion to "start over" was made and approved. Members paid 15 cents each meeting; funds were used to pay a janitor 10 cents a week and to purchase speech books, on the "good judgment of the committee."

A typical evening program was "carried out as follows:"

Declamation .....	Lizzie Feters
Impersonations .....	James Tucker
Declamation .....	Arthur Goodwin
Essay .....	Blanche Helmick
Declamation .....	Flossie Abdill
Wit and Humor.....	Will Longer
Declamation .....	Mary Feters
Jokes.....	Karle Libe
Declamation .....	Bessie Abdill
Impersonations .....	James Tucker

#### Recess

House called to order by the President	
Declamation .....	Della Feters
Autobiography .....	Glen Abdill
The following spoke on Extemp.....	Ben Helmick, John Simpson, Glen Abdill, James Tucker and Earnest Miller
Dialogue	
Debate—Affirmative: Mr. Libe and Mr. Taylor.	
Negative: Mr. Stout and Mr. Feters.	
Judges: Mr. Kenegy, Mr. Fates, Mr. Herring.	
Distribution of ballots by usher. Decision of judges: 2 affirmative, 1 negative.	
Remarks	
Song.....	Misses Lizzie and Della Feters and Misses Zephyr and Dessa White
Paper.....	Ben Helmick
Report of critic.	
Reading of program for next week.	
Adjournment	

The dialogues were usually comedies. "Hans Van Smash" was a popular farce. So were "The Irish Linen Peddler" and "Uncle Jeff's Money." Young ladies might present "Witches in the Cream," "The Tea Party" or "The Society for the Suppression of Gossip." Drama was best left to the opera house in the county seat where the actors were not quite so intimately known as somebody's sister or the neighbor's hired hand.

The "paper" mentioned was the literary "frosting" on the cultural "cake." Members took turns at writing one-shot editions, in longhand on copy paper. The papers were as many as a dozen pages in length, with names like "The Verdi Illuminator" or "The Youth's Guiding Star." Contents dwelt on local happenings with many "inside" jokes. Sometimes the humorous barbs went too deep and the editor found himself the target

of even sharper sallies at later meetings. The following excerpts are from "The Youth's Guiding Star," written by William Jones of Washington in February 1902:

#### THE YOUTH'S GUIDING STAR

(February 13, 1902)

Published once a Week.....William J., Editor

Single Copies \$1.00

Yearly subscription 25c

Enters the post office as second class matter.

For five new yearly subscribers we will give a photograph and the song of the lovers, *IN THE SHADOW OF THE PINES*. For ten new yearly subscriptions we will give a book on how to raise poultry and buy old roosters, E. D. Sowash, author.

This paper is printed especially for the benefit of this society. It contains all the latest news. The editor will pay good wages for a good reporter. All advertising space sold cheap if called for soon.

If anyone in this house gets warm because their name *isn't* or *is* in this paper they can go outside until they cool off.

This is fine weather we are having.

This society wants more members.

Two weeks ago there was a large attendance at Literary. We wish a few more of the old folks would take part.

The oldest members of our society is Mr. McA. (Joe). I should judge from his looks that he is seventy years old. You would think from his manner he is only about forty or fifty. When the young folks of this vicinity had come to a conclusion to organize a Literary they picked a night to meet at Franklin Center. We had no one in the crowd that thoroughly understood organizing a Literary. So we called on Mr. McA. and he kindly gave us assistance and served as president the first month. He has attended every night since. He is a great friend of the young folks, well liked by all who know him. He is an exception for a man of his age.

#### LOCALS:

There was a large crowd at Frank S.'s sale January 30th. Everything sold well. C. O. G.'s sale is next Tuesday, February 18th. There was a good attendance at Mr. D.'s sale. Everything sold well.

There are quite a number of cases of Small Pox in Washington. It is reported this disease is all over the whole United States.

Roy D. purchased a road cart at his daddy-in-law's sale.

Frank N. purchased a surrey at Mr. S.'s sale. I don't hardly understand what that means. I expect he and Homer S. are going out together to see the girls.

Bert H. is home on a visit.

Two Irishmen took refuge under the bed clothes from the mosquitoes. At last one of them ventured to peep out, and seeing a firefly said to his companion, "Mike, it's no use. One of the creatures is searching for us with a lantern!"

Anyone wishing help to butcher call on Mr. N. and son. They give satisfaction.

The steam shovel is a sight to behold. But it holds more dirt than sight.

Willie had swallowed a penny and his mother was in a state of much alarm. "Helen," she called to her sister in the next room, "send for a doctor. Willie has swallowed a penny." The terrified boy looked up so imploringly. "No, Mamma," he interposed, "send for the minister." "The minister!" exclaimed the mother. "Yes, because Pa says our minister can get money out of anybody."

Satan puts another gridiron on the fire when he sees a man buying beer with money his wife earned at the washtub.

We sleep, but the loom of life never stops; and the pattern which was weaving when the sun went down is weaving when it comes up tomorrow.

It is calculated that it would take one typist 3,700 years of working time to write Dear Sir and Yours Truly to all the letters written and posted in one year.

Mr. K. sawed wood on Monday.

When man and woman are made *one* by a clergyman the question is, which is the *one*? Sometimes there is a long struggle between them before this matter is finally settled.

Which are the two smallest things mentioned in Scripture?  
The widow's mite and the wicked flea.

Why is a room full of married folks like a room empty?  
Because there is not a single person in it.

"What is the difference between a young lady and a mouse?  
The one charms the he's and the other harms the cheese.

Why are hot cakes like a caterpillar?  
Because it is the grub that makes the butterfly.

While hunting, two sons and two fathers shot three ducks.

How could they each carry one duck home?

There were a grandfather, a father and a son, and each carried one.

Lost: On Sigourney Road, a large appetite. Finder please leave at this office and receive a reward.

For Sale: Ten bushels good whimwhams. Also three dozen thoroughbred Shorthorn chickens. Inquire Bert H.

A woman committed suicide by hanging herself to an apple tree. At the funeral a neighbor, noticing the sad appearance of the husband, consoled him by saying that he had met with a terrible loss. "Yes," said the husband, heaving a sigh, "she must have kicked like thunder to have shaken off six bushels of green apples that would have been worth a dollar a bushel when ripe."

People of whom we have heard:

The young man who cast his eye on a young lady coming out of church has had it replaced and now sees as well as ever.

The lady who went off in hysterics came back on the Sigourney Road.

The man who jumped up on the spur of the moment was glad to sit down again.

The young man who flew into a passion has had his wings clipped.

There was a girl named Jackson  
And she was wondrous wise,  
She bought a pair of spectacles  
Because she had weak eyes.  
One night she went to Literary  
As fast as she could go;  
The sled tipped over and she lost  
Her glasses in the snow.

Miss Coralie T. would be pleased to receive several bushels of valentines tomorrow from boys of this neighborhood. So don't disappoint her, boys.

Burt H. returns to Des Moines Monday to continue his course of studies. He has given up telegraphy and thinks some of studying natural science. He is sorry he did not bring home some specimens of the insect kingdom with him as several never saw what is called the bed-bug. Des Moines is a great place for this insect, he says.

This paper has been read in presence of many this evening, and anyone wishing to subscribe for this paper please call soon.

This paper is gone and so am I.



### The Forgotten Lines

The "Literary Society" was the really big variety show of its day. It was live, it offered something for everyone and it invited audience participation. No wonder it flourished well into the 20th century. But on March 8, 1915, a rural newspaper correspondent had this to say in his weekly letter to the *Washington Evening Journal*: "There was not as good an attendance at Literary Friday evening as usual."

To quote the closing statement from "The Youth's Guiding Star" — "This paper is gone and so am I." It might have been "Literary" speaking.

## WELCOME

(A concert piece.)

Parents, friends, we bid you welcome,  
 To our school-room dear;  
 And we join our loving voices  
 Now to greet you here.  
 If to-day mistakes we're making,  
 Many failures, too,  
 Oh! believe us, we have tried  
 Our very best to do.



Expressions for Children

TRIALS OF A TWIN<sup>o</sup>

In form and feature, face and limb,  
I grew so like my brother,  
That folks got taking me for him,  
And each for one another.  
It puzzled all our kith and kin,  
It reached a fearful pitch;  
For one of us was born a twin,  
And not a soul knew which.

One day, to make the matter worse,  
Before our names were fixed,  
As we were being washed by nurse,  
We got completely mixed;  
And thus, you see, by fate's decree,  
Or rather nurse's whim,  
My brother John got christened me,  
And I got christened him.

This fatal likeness ever dogged  
My footsteps when at school,  
And I was always getting flogged,  
When John turned out a fool.  
I put this question, fruitlessly,  
To everyone I knew,  
"What would you do, if you were me,  
To prove that you were you."

Our close resemblance turned the tide  
Of my domestic life,  
For somehow, my intended bride  
Became my brother's wife.  
In fact, year after year the same  
Absurd mistakes went on,  
And *when I died*, the neighbors came  
And *buried brother John*.

<sup>o</sup>Unknown, *One Hundred Choice Selections*, No. 9, ed. Phineas Garrett; Philadelphia, The Penn Publishing Company, 1900.

## A LITTLE BOY'S WONDER

(For a bright little fellow of five years—in frock.)

I wonder, oh! I wonder what makes ve sun go wound;  
 I wonder what can make ve fowers tun popin' from ve gwound.  
 I wonder if my mamma loves Billy mom'n me;  
 I wonder if I'd beat a bear a-climbin' up a twee;  
 I wonder how ve angels 'member everybody's pwayers,  
 I wonder if I didn't leave my sandwich on ve stairs,  
 I wonder what my teacher meant about "a twuthful heart;"  
 I guess tis finkin' Untul Jack will surely bring my cart.  
 I wonder what I'd do if I should hear a lion woar;  
 I bet I'd knock him on ve head, and lay him on ve floor.  
 I wonder if our Farver knew how awful I did feel  
 When Tom's pie was in my pottet, and I wead, "Vou shall not steal."  
 I wonder if, when boys get big, it's dreadful in ve dark;  
 I wonder what my doggie thinks when he begins to bark.  
 I wonder what vat birdie says who hollers so and sings;  
 I wonder, oh! I wonder lots and lots of over fings.

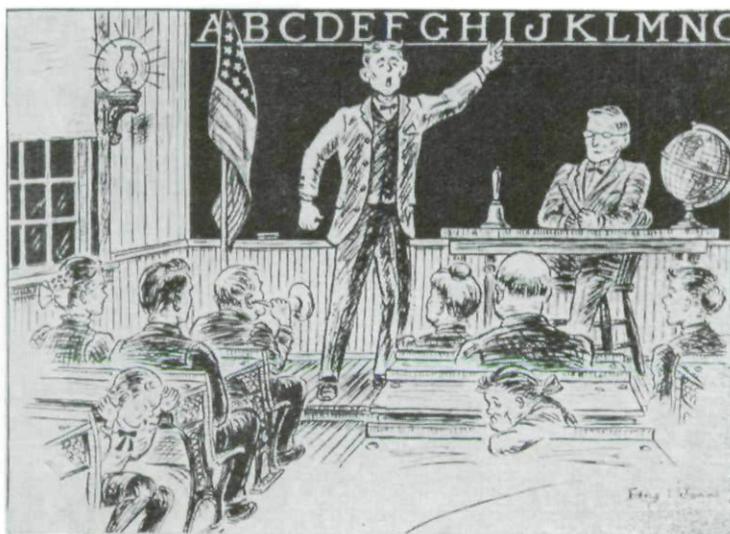
## THEY WERE MIXED

I studied my tables over and over, and backward and  
 forward, too;  
 But I couldn't remember six times nine and I didn't know  
 what to do.  
 Till sister told me to play with my doll and not to bother  
 my head,  
 "If you call her 'Fifty-four' for awhile you'd learn it  
 by heart," she said.  
 So I took my favorite, Mary Ann (though I thought 'twas  
 a dreadful shame,  
 To give such a perfectly lovely child such a perfectly  
 horrid name),  
 And I called her my dear little "Fifty-four" a hundred  
 times, till I knew  
 The answer of six times nine as well as the answer of  
 two times two.  
 Next day Elizabeth Wigglesworth, who always acts so  
 proud,  
 Said "Six times nine is fifty-two," and I nearly laughed  
 aloud!  
 But I wished I hadn't when teacher said, "Now, Dorothy,  
 tell if you can."  
 For I thought of my doll and—sakes alive!—I answered,  
 "Mary Ann!"

## CURFEW MUST NOT RING TO-NIGHT

England's sun was slowly setting o'er the hills so far away,  
Filling all the land with beauty at the close of one sad day;  
And the last rays kiss'd the forehead of a man and maiden fair,  
He with step so slow and weakened, she with sunny, floating  
hair;  
He with sad bowed head, and thoughtful, she with lips so cold  
and white,  
Struggling to keep back the murmur, "Curfew must not ring  
to-night."  
"Sexton," Bessie's white lips faltered, pointing to the prison  
old,  
With its walls so dark and gloomy—walls so dark, and damp,  
and cold—  
"I've a lover in that prison, doomed this very night to die,  
At the ringing of the Curfew, and no earthly help is nigh.  
Cromwell will not come till sunset," and her face grew  
strangely white,  
As she spoke in husky whispers, "Curfew must not ring to-  
night."  
"Bessie," calmly spoke the sexton—every word pierced her  
young heart  
Like a thousand gleaming arrows—like a deadly poisoned dart;  
"Long, long years I've rung the Curfew from that gloomy  
shadowed tower;  
Every evening, just at sunset, it has told the twilight hour;  
I have done my duty ever, tried to do it just and right,  
Now I'm old, I will not miss it; girl, the Curfew rings to-  
night!"  
Wild her eyes and pale her features, stern and white her  
thoughtful brow,  
And within her heart's deep centre, Bessie made a solemn vow;  
She had listened while the judges read, without a tear or sigh,  
"At the ringing of the Curfew—Basil Underwood *must die*."  
And her breath came fast and faster, and her eyes grew large  
and bright—  
One low murmur, scarcely spoken—"Curfew *must not* ring  
to-night!"  
She with light step bounded forward, spring within the old  
church door,  
Left the old man coming slowly, paths he'd trod so oft before;  
Not one moment paused the maiden, but with cheek and brow  
aglow,  
Staggered up the gloomy tower, where the bell swung to and  
fro;  
Then she climbed the slimy ladder, dark, without one ray of  
light,  
Upward still, her pale lips saying: "Curfew shall not ring  
to-night."

She has reached the topmost ladder, o'er her hangs the great dark bell,  
And the awful gloom beneath her, like the pathway down to hell;  
See, the ponderous tongue is swinging, 'tis the hour of Curfew now—  
And the sight has chilled her bosom, stopped her breath and paled her brow.  
Shall she let it ring? No, never! her eyes flash with sudden light,  
As she springs and grasps it firmly—"Curfew shall not ring to-night!"  
Out she swung, far out, the city seemed a tiny speck below;  
There, 'twixt heaven and earth suspended, as the bell swung to and fro;  
And the half-deaf Sexton ringing (years he had not heard the bell,)  
And he thought the twilight Curfew rang young Basil's funeral knell;  
Still the maiden clinging firmly, cheek and brow so pale and white,  
Stilled her frightened heart's wild beating—"Curfew shall not ring to-night."  
It was o'er—the bell ceased swaying, and the maiden stepped once more  
Firmly on the damp old ladder, where for hundred years before  
Human foot had not been planted; and what she this night had done,  
Should be told in long years after—as the rays of setting sun  
Light the sky with mellow beauty, aged sires with heads of white,  
Tell their children why the Curfew did not ring that one sad night.  
O'er the distant hills came Cromwell; Bessie saw him, and her brow,  
Lately white with sickening terror, glows with sudden beauty now;  
At his feet she told her story, showed her hands all bruised and torn;  
And her sweet young face so haggard, with a look so sad and worn,  
Touched his heart with sudden pity—lit his eyes with misty light;  
"Go, your lover lives!" cried Cromwell; "Curfew shall not ring to-night."



Sketch by Edna L. Jones Showing  
an Evening at Literary Society

#### GOODNIGHT

(Sleepy little girl in nightgown.  
Suitable at close of concert or  
children's entertainment.)

I am so very near asleep

I scarce can keep from gaping,

And so I think it must be time

That people all were napping;

So just before my eyes close tight,

I wish you, each and all, good night.

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