THE WITTEMBERG MANUAL LABOR COLLEGE

Students of early mid-western immigration tell us that before 1850 the number of New England people among the residents of Iowa was comparatively small.[1] But even from the first New England influence in the State was strong, and this was especially true in matters of religion and education: these two things loomed so large in the Puritan mind and were carried so persistently to his new community by the migrating New Englander that we are justified in giving him credit out of all proportion to his numbers for the founding of churches and schools on the Middle Border.[2]

Certainly this New England passion for church and school sent many thin but potent lines of influence into Iowa. Sometimes it was a direct contribution of leaders or of money, sometimes it was but an inspiration caught by persons who themselves had never been east of the Hudson River. At least a few Iowa educational ventures were inspired by the old passion but were undertaken in a new manner, and among these was Wittemberg Manual Labor College, founded in 1855 some five miles north of the present city of Newton. This daring and in some respects revolutionary undertaking has its own interest as a story of adventure, and it has a certain historical interest, too, as an illustration of mid-western educational development and progress.

Educational undertakings in new countries must borrow the materials and many of the methods developed by school men in older communities, but pioneer teachers usually deal with these materials in a new spirit. They undertake the

[1] Douglass's *The Pilgrims of Iowa*, p. 292.

[2] Douglass's *The Pilgrims of Iowa*, pp. 291-294.

task in an amateur and practical way. Education, like all difficult undertakings, of necessity becomes professionalized as it tries to meet the greater and greater demands made upon it. Educators must decide not only how to practice their art but also what things will help produce a liberally educated mind. This process of decision and accomplishment is long and intricate.

At its best the resulting education makes for liberation and fulness of life; but at its worst, when the process falls into less inspired keeping, it becomes hidebound and steeped in a stubborn tradition, a thing of old formulae and old shibboleths, satisfying only to professionals who live in an academic atmosphere created in their own likeness. When educational process and content fail to change with the civilization of which they are a part, when earnest and capable students find themselves unable to see the forest for the trees, when their training fits them only for a world that has largely disappeared, the time is ripe for an infusion of new vigor from the soil.

This revolutionary spirit which desires a new vigor and a new alignment is nearly always present in the educational world, but it sometimes needs a new combination of circumstances to set it in motion. Such a spirit entered into the founding of the Wittemberg Manual Labor College and gave to that undertaking a certain amount of lasting importance, though the college itself lived for less than a quarter of a century. It drew this amateur and progressive spirit from the very atmosphere of the Middle Border. So while the college was in one sense an offshoot of the parent New England stem, in another sense it was a true product of its own time and place.

The community of Wittemberg was founded in 1853,[3] on the line of pioneer settlement that was slowly advancing to

[3] Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa,* Vol. I, p. 177.

the north and northwest across Jasper County. The village of Newton had been founded about eight years earlier, and in 1846 Jasper County had been legally organized with Newton as the county seat.[4] Among the men who came into the new community and began building homes and breaking sod were two of unusual capacity and personality — Reverend Thomas Merrill and Richard Sherer. Both were ardent anti-slavery men, and in their former homes in southwestern Ohio both had been members of the Free Presbyterian church. While Reverend Merrill was not the leader of the new settlers in the manner of the old New England divines who had led their congregations overseas to the new world, he was accepted as a natural leader to whom people could turn for guidance in community and personal affairs. The first Sunday he was in the neighborhood he called the few neighbors together and held a Sunday school. This gathering was the real beginning of the Wittemberg church, one of the strong rural churches of the State. Soon after, probably the following year, Reverend Merrill formally organized this church in the Free Presbyterian faith.

It seems impossible to determine precisely who christened the neighborhood or the immediate origin of the name. Without much doubt the name came originally either from the German kingdom of Württemberg or from the Saxon town of Wittenberg, the town associated with Martin Luther and the Reformation. Possibly it is a combination of both names, for pioneer spelling, at least before the days of the spelling school, was rather hap-hazard. In the early records of the college the name is spelled "Wittemburg", with a "u" instead of an "e",[5] but the present spelling, "Wittemberg", has been followed for many years.

Families moved in, and the community grew both in

[4] Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa,* Vol. I, pp. 44-48.

[5] Manuscript records of Wittemberg Manual Labor College.

numbers and in self confidence. Reverend Merrill had accomplished the first of his purposes in founding the church, and true to the New England tradition he then approached the problem of education.

It is hard at this distance to realize how completely these pioneer farmers were dependent upon their own efforts. The Rock Island Railroad had reached the Mississippi River in 1854. If wheat was to be sold for cash it must be hauled overland to the Mississippi River, a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles;[6] and if goods of eastern manufacture were to be brought in they must be hauled back the same distance. If wheat and corn were to be ground into flour or meal, or logs sawed into lumber, mills must be built and operated. The planting of groves and orchards, the making of trail roads along the divides and across unbridged streams, the founding of towns and the opening of markets — all these things waited until the busy settlers found time and skill to attend to them.

The same was largely true of schools. The public schools were very elementary; and opportunities for higher education were far to seek, though a few such opportunities did exist in the State. Denmark Academy had opened its doors in 1845 and Iowa College, now Grinnell, had begun in Davenport in 1848. But if the young people were to have education made available in the central part of the State the pioneers themselves would have to create and maintain the necessary schools.[7]

On December 18, 1855, a group of Wittemberg farmers met at the home of John Carey and adopted articles of incorporation for a college, and they did it without much

[6] J. P. Beatty used to tell many stories of the hardships of this winter hauling.

[7] *Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. VII, p. 7; Parker's *Higher Education in Iowa*, p. 138.

if any promise of outside help.[8] No church education society loaned them money, no wealthy eastern patrons stood ready to see them through. Their financial resources consisted of what money they could raise among themselves and among equally poor pioneers throughout the State. How poor these Wittemberg men were may be judged from the fact that with land selling at government prices of less than two dollars an acre few felt able to own more than eighty acres and many contented themselves with less. Founding even the small and primitive school which they had in mind would involve the erection of a suitable building, the maintenance of a teaching staff, and the provision of living quarters for the students. The plan included a "college farm" which should serve the double purpose of a laboratory in the study of agriculture and a source of revenue. For this purpose the founders secured a fine tract of prairie land of more than four hundred acres.

But if the founders displayed a courage approaching rashness in undertaking this financial burden with so few resources, they displayed no less courage and self reliance in determining the character of the college. Previous to that time few colleges had admitted women as students. Women were not generally employed to teach even in elementary schools, nor were they permitted to take much part in public affairs or in church administration. Whatever higher education they received they had to get from private tutors or in the rather feeble seminaries founded for the purpose.

Slavery was still a constitutionally recognized institution, protected by the most solemn legal enactments. Before 1850 the Iowa people who had come directly or in-

[8] This and most of the following facts about the college have been drawn from the manuscript records of the proceedings of the board of trustees. See also Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa*, Vol. I, pp. 129-135.

directly from the South are said to have outnumbered the New Englanders in the State by six to one;[9] and even as late as 1854 some politicians believed that both Iowa and Illinois were favorable to the extension of slave territory. These politicians may have been misled into thinking that every person of southern origin held the usual southern view of this institution, but we know that many of these people had come to the Middle Border for the express purpose of escaping from the presence of slavery. But the fact seems clear that in 1855 Iowa public opinion still included at least a vigorous minority favorable to the maintenance and protection of this institution.

Before 1855 higher education had not taken a practical turn. It still consisted of ancient languages, mathematics, moral philosophy, theology, and the like. Experimental science was still in its infancy. Mechanic arts, domestic science, agriculture, and the like were not recognized as curricular possibilities. In fact college education was not very democratic either in content or in spirit; for while almost any young man of white parentage could gain admission to some college, the tendency of his education was to take him into the so-called learned professions and away from the everyday work of the world.

In the light of these facts it is interesting to read over the first few articles of incorporation adopted in a farmhouse that winter evening seventy years ago.

Art. 1st.— This incorporation shall be known as the Wittemberg Manual Labor College and shall be invested with all the powers and immunities and the full period of duration authorized by the code of Iowa.

Art. 2nd.— The objects of this association shall be to establish and conduct a literary institution under the above name in Jasper county, Iowa, in which the advantages of a thorough education

[9] Douglass's *The Pilgrims of Iowa*, p. 292, quoting from the studies of Professor F. I. Herriott, of Drake University.

shall be furnished at the least possible expense, to break down so far as our influence may extend the oppressive distinction on account of caste and color, and to counteract both by precept and example a spirit of aristocracy that is becoming so prevalent and which it is feared the policy and influence of many of our institutions of learning have a great tendency to encourage.

Art. 3rd.— We will endeavor to maintain a school in which a pure morality and evangelical religion shall be taught, guarding against the introduction of both sectarian teaching and sectional influence.

Art. 4th.— As the name of the corporation implies, labor shall be combined with study, invariably, in such manner as the trustees may direct, so that not less than two hours of manual labor each day be required of every teacher and student, unless prevented by sickness or other bodily infirmity.

Art. 6th.— No person of good moral character who is not a slaveholder in practice or principle, shall be denied the privilege of being a shareholder in the institution, none shall be rendered ineligible to office or refused admittance as a student on terms of perfect equality on account of caste, color or sex.

This plan is clearly the work of persons of definite convictions who are not careful to conciliate others of differing opinions. It demands democracy in education; it admits women on an equality with men; it takes a savage thrust at slavery and opens the door to negro students: and it recognizes the dignity of labor by making it a required part of the college course.

The first official board consisted of Richard Sherer, president; John Carey and John A. Work, vice presidents; Andrew Failor, secretary; James R. Crawford, treasurer; and Reverend Thomas Merrill, general agent. Other members of the board were Mrs. Elizabeth Merrill, Mrs. Mary Carey, James McLaughlin, S. A. Thornton, J. P. Beatty, and Thomas Vanatta.

It should be remembered that all these people, except possibly Reverend Merrill, were farm men and women, en-

gaged in creating profitable farms for themselves on the prairie. They did not undertake the founding of the school with any exalted notion of building a monument to themselves. They undertook it in the course of the day's work, that their children might be educated. We may assume that while Reverend Merrill probably crystallized the desire for a school, the farmer trustees doubtless insisted upon the innovations. All the trustees were anti-slavery men and agreed perfectly on the clauses dealing with slavery and with negro students. All of them were church members and agreed that "pure morality" and "evangelical religion" should be taught. But not all of them had belonged to the same denomination; and this may help to explain the stand against sectarianism.

They had agreed as a matter of convenience to organize the church in the Free Presbyterian faith, for they had a minister of that denomination among their own number, but in 1865 when the Free Presbyterian denomination disappeared with the destruction of its old enemy, slavery, the local church had a difficult time deciding on the denomination to which it should change. J. P. Beatty, a Presbyterian and one of the most extraordinary men for learning and common sense in the neighborhood, decided that none of the half dozen denominations most strongly urged in the church meeting could win a majority. As he thought of the matter it occurred to him that Congregationalism, a denomination not previously suggested, was tolerant enough and included enough of the doctrinal points at issue to make it satisfactory to the members. On his motion the church became Congregational and still remains in that communion.

Although the new institution called itself a college, like other pioneer colleges it had to prepare its own students before they were qualified to enter upon collegiate work.

The record of the second meeting of the trustees, held on Christmas day, 1855, a week after the organization, contains the following notations: "On motion the following rates of tuition were fixed for a term of twelve weeks: Three dollars for the primary department, four dollars for the common English branches and five dollars for the advanced English branches and languages." At the same meeting the college faculty was appointed. It consisted of Reverend and Mrs. Merrill, and their combined salary was fixed at thirty dollars a month. So this devoted minister in addition to carrying the thankless burden of raising money as general agent was to be dean of the faculty and do half the teaching.

At the close of the first term the faculty reported to the trustees that the tuition received amounted to $44.25. Since the sum due the teachers was $90, there appeared a deficit of $45.75. The report presented on September 24, 1856, for the term ending August 29th showed tuition receipts of $76.23 and a resulting deficit of $39.27. It appears that among the students were four Vanattas, four Sherers, three Works, five McLaughlins, two Careys, and three Merrills. It is clear that the trustees were not only assuming the burden of the school but were also supplying a fair number of students for it.

The trustees had a plan which they hoped would raise the money needed to build a college building and at the same time produce a suitable urban setting for the college. They reserved ten acres as a campus and then divided part of the remainder of the farm into town lots. The village of Wittemberg was platted on December 15, 1856, and official record of the plat was made on January 12, 1858.[10] Many of these lots were sold, and a number of houses were built. The site reserved for the college building was north-

[10] Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa,* Vol. I, p. 362.

east of the present church building and directly in line with the highway leading to Newton.

A temporary structure was built to answer the purpose until money could be raised and materials collected for the college building. The physical difficulties were enormous. No lumber was available, so the trustees decided to make use of native timber; and for this purpose they purchased eight acres of timber land from Jesse Hammer at a cost of $33 an acre. Timber land was worth much more at that time than the best prairie land, a condition which the rapid settlement of the country soon reversed. John Carey went to Ohio, his former home, and endeavored to get some manufacturer of sawmill machinery to build a portable sawmill according to plans which he was prepared to furnish, but for a time he was unsuccessful. None of them had so much as heard of such a thing, did not believe it would work, and refused to build it. Finally he persuaded a Norwalk manufacturer to follow his plans. The mill was shipped to Wittemberg, worked splendidly, and was in service for many years. It is supposed to have been the first portable sawmill ever built, and it is said that some of the innovations worked out by this prairie farmer in designing the outfit made possible some radical improvements in the building of larger sawmills.[11]

The college building finally erected on the site reserved for it was a large two-story rectangular structure. A wide hall, flanked by class rooms, led from the main entrance in the center of the south side to the chapel room on the north which extended the full length of the building. The second floor was fitted as living quarters for the teachers and for some of the students. Evidently it was the plan to use the entire building for classes when the school grew large enough to need the space. The inside finish was black

[11] Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa,* Vol. I, p. 67.

walnut, the floors were of oak, and the siding was butternut or, as it was then called, white walnut.

The work was constantly hampered by lack of money, and finishing the building was a slow process. On June 22, 1861, the trustees passed a resolution offering the Free Presbyterian church the right to hold Sunday services in the chapel room for a period of five years if the church would finish the room in a specified manner. The church accepted, did the work, and used the room for the five-year period.

The financial panic of 1857 was a hard blow. The following resolutions, adopted by the trustees, on March 4, 1857, show of what stuff these college builders were made:

> Resolved, 1st. That we recognize in our present embarassed condition as a board and the causes which have led to it, the plain teachings of divine providence.
>
> Resolved, 2d. That both duty and interest demand that we should go forward in the erection of the college building now under contract.
>
> Resolved, 3d. That in order to the accomplishment of this end, we feel that God is now demanding of us the contribution of such a portion of his property now in our hands as will put this enterprise beyond embarrassment.[12]

It is said that Thomas Merrill, John Carey, James R. Crawford, John M. King, Andrew Failor, and J. P. Beatty mortgaged their farms for sums ranging from $250

[12] Manuscript record for July 8, 1857: "A. Failor read a letter from Mr. Coldson in which he requests the money as per contract by return mail or the return of the deed for the land purchased of him. The board on motion ordered the return of the deed. The Secretary read a notice from the contractor to the president, asking for an advance of $2800 for the purchase of materials for the college building. On motion the subject was ordered to be laid on the table. . . . On motion King, Merrill & Failor were appointed a committee to confer with the contractor relative to present difficulties." These and many other laconic entries indicate the financial troubles of the trustees. See also Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa*, Vol. I, pp. 132, 133.

to $1000 each to secure money to finish the building. These were large sums when the low market value of the land at that time is considered and all these men were under much anxiety until the mortgages were paid.

The old records deal mostly with the financial troubles of the trustees, but this is but part of the story of the school. As an educational venture, seen from the standpoint of the students, it was a success from the beginning. During the life of the school the enrollment ranged from forty to ninety. Most of the instruction was necessarily of common school or academy grade. The teachers were capable and were well educated for their time, and the students were anxious to learn. The college became the social center of the community life, and these students not only received instruction that otherwise would have been denied them, but also had the privilege of sharing in a life more cultured than the average of the Middle Border.

On November 24, 1856, the trustees set aside a tract of land to be used as a cemetery, and in October, 1858, title to the cemetery was tranferred to the Free Presbyterian church. In 1868 when the church, then Congregational in denomination, was preparing to erect a building, the trustees gave to the church the plot of ground where the building still stands.

In 1857 the trustees decided to start the publication of a monthly journal. This was first called *The Wittemberg Educator* but was later renamed *The Wittemberg Review.* They purchased a press and type, and Mr. and Mrs. Merrill undertook the work of editing and publishing, in return for any profits that might accrue. This publication venture was probably inspired by the hope that it would bring the needs and possibilities of the college to the attention of possible patrons. Most of the editorial work was done by Sarah Merrill, a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Merrill. How long the

paper was published is not known, but it probably did not live for more than two or three years.

On January 20, 1860, Reverend Merrill was elected president of the college and held that office until 1862, when he became the chaplain of one of the Iowa regiments. He was never afterwards associated with the college. Rev. G. T. Poage, a farmer preacher, became president of the board that year and held the office to the end of the written records.

Financing the college became increasingly difficult, however, and at length the trustees deviated a little from their non-sectarian position. On December 15, 1862, a request was sent to the Wesleyan Methodist general conference to share in the burden. The conference agreed to do this but on terms that were unsatisfactory to the trustees, so the college was continued on its old footing.

In 1866 a committee was appointed to consider the transfer of part of the college property to some responsible person who would agree to continue the college according to the principles promulgated in the articles of incorporation. In May, 1867, a contract was made with Reverend S. A. McLean, an eastern minister, by which he was to advance the sum of $2000 in cash and to conduct a school of academy grade for four years. At the end of that time the college was to pay him the sum of $4015. In 1868 a new contract was made with Reverend McLean whereby he was to cancel his claim under the earlier contract, continue the school for ten years, counting from January 1, 1868, and in return was to receive title to most of the college property. This settlement was not satisfactory to all the trustees, and John Carey brought suit in the courts to prevent the execution of the agreement. The court held the contract void but gave to the McLeans a lien on all the property to secure the considerable sums of money due them.

Reverend McLean died in 1869, but his daughters Elizabeth and Anna continued the school. Eventually the lien was foreclosed, and all the property passed to the McLean family. Finally Elizabeth McLean, who had been the head and operative force of the school after her father's death, was married, and her leaving brought the college to an end.

Several things made the continuance of the college difficult if not impossible. The courage and independence of the original trustees outran their means. In their anxiety to avoid sectarianism they had refused to affiliate with any church body and few schools in a new country in those days could do this and still live. The interest and approval of an organized denomination brought church money, and in addition it brought the school to the attention of charitable people in the East. Without this avenue of approach it was difficult if not impossible to reach those people.

In the second place the Rock Island Railroad in building westward had passed through Newton and had missed Wittemberg, and it was evident that such an inland town had small chance of survival. Newton increased while Wittemberg decreased. To add to these handicaps, the school had serious competition near at hand. Hazel Dell Academy was founded in Newton in 1856, and grew rapidly; for it was but natural that students preferred going to a school in a growing and interesting town. So the Wittemberg college was closed, the building was torn down and the wrecked material was used for buildings on neighboring farms. In 1878 the village of Wittemberg was legally vacated, and all streets not used as public highways were closed. The village houses have become farm homes, and the only remaining physical evidence of the old educational experiment is the rather unusual layout of the roads which follow the old streets.[13]

[13] Weaver's *Past and Present of Jasper County Iowa,* Vol. I, pp. 135, 136.

So this heroic pioneer effort came to an end. The founders failed in one sense, for they had hoped that the modest beginnings which they made might grow into a great, democratic college that for countless generations should offer the kind of education in which they believed so firmly. But in another sense they did not fail. The school bridged what otherwise would have been a gap in pioneer education. Hundreds of people who have lived useful lives received training and inspiration there. And without doubt the courage and idealism of these daring and godly men and women have placed a lasting mark upon the Wittemberg neighborhood. While these people distrusted sectarianism they were deeply religious. Over and over again the old records state that the meetings of the trustees were "organized by prayer". Scores of Wittemberg people who scarcely know even the names of these old pioneers have entered into the fruits of their labors; and hundreds who have moved away have carried echoes of their accomplishments to reëcho in distant neighborhoods.

ROBERT Y. KERR

GRINNELL IOWA