

SEWARD C. HOWE  
AN INDIVIDUALIST IN EDUCATION

Seward C. Howe, teacher, elocutionist, Latin scholar, long-time principal of the academy known by his name, and worthy son of a still more famous father, deserves special mention among Henry County's noteworthy citizens. He has not always received the recognition that was his due. It has been his misfortune to be compared with his father, Samuel L. Howe, as a teacher and, as a result, his light has been dimmed by the greater luster of his father's fame.<sup>1</sup> Yet the fact is that Seward C. Howe was a teacher of exceptional ability. The success he achieved as principal of Howe's Academy for forty years proves that ability beyond question. He was no ordinary teacher. And in addition he had the ability to manage a most difficult school under various, sometimes adverse, conditions and to command the loyal affection and admiration of thousands of pupils. Such long continued success is proof of innate ability of a high order.

Carlyle said that every institution is but the lengthened shadow of a man. That was twice true of Howe's Academy for it was the work of two men — Samuel L. Howe, the man who laid the keel and launched it in the turbulent waters before the Civil War, and Seward C. Howe, the son, who ably took the helm and guided the school through the breakers of the later years. It was truly a one-man institution. No one else had a word to say about its policies or its management.

<sup>1</sup> A story of Samuel L. Howe and Seward C. Howe and the Academy the father and son conducted from 1841 to 1916, by Roger S. Galer, was published in *The Palimpsest* for October, 1931, Vol. XII, pp. 381-401, under the title *The Old Mill*.

The Howe family was, indeed, remarkable in many respects. Samuel L. Howe, the man who founded a school in the frontier town of Mount Pleasant in 1841, was a teacher who followed his own path, a law unto himself. He was a small man, with a long beard and determined eyes. A man of great force of character, positive beliefs, and intense convictions, he was self-reliant, arbitrary, and efficient. As a teacher he demanded thoroughness and clear-thinking, as well as constant drill on fundamentals. As a citizen he held high the standard of national and civic righteousness, as Amos and Hosea did of old.

Between 1850 to 1860, the Howe Academy was a focus of anti-slavery sentiment and action, for Samuel L. Howe founded a newspaper dedicated to freedom for the slave, and published it from the Old Mill, he and his sons and sometimes his pupils setting the type. The fiery editorials were the product of Samuel L.'s pen. By day the hum and bustle of the schoolroom; at night the click of metal type, pounding out the song of liberty.

The mother, Charlotte Howe, was like a mouse among a pack of hunting dogs, intelligent but quiet and undemonstrative, attending closely to her housekeeping and her family and living an uneventful career until her death in 1895.

And yet Charlotte Howe must have had an exciting life, for the children, at least the six sons, were volatile, highly nervous individuals, inheriting much of the individuality and drive of their dynamic father. What a household it must have been. When the sons were old enough to carry on independently there were clashes of wills and rivalry as to who was to succeed to the dynasty and wear the crown. The two older sons, Oscar and W. P., or Pem as he was familiarly known, fired by their father's intense hatred of slavery, joined John Brown in Kansas and fought with him

in the fierce border warfare of that time. Three sons of the family were Union soldiers in the Civil War.

The oldest son, Oscar, taught for a while, then went to New York, became the head of one of the important city schools, and remained there until he died. Edward P. and Hayward were talented men and brilliant teachers. After serving an apprenticeship at home they migrated to California and conducted an academy in Sacramento for many years until their death. Samuel L., Jr., was not a teacher but became a musician of talent. His improvisations on the organ and exuberant execution on that instrument excited amazement among amateurs.

The second of the Howe sons, W. P., or Pem as he was familiarly known, was a gifted, high-strung, exceedingly emotional member of the family. He was at one time an excellent teacher and might justly have aspired to the headship of the school upon his father's retirement. This ambition would no doubt have been gratified but for his unfortunate convivial habits which rendered him undependable. Frequent quarrels between him and Seward were embarrassing incidents to their mother and themselves, until Pem finally yielded and Seward henceforth wielded the scepter. Fortunately these quarrels did not seriously affect the school. When Samuel L. Howe died in 1877, indeed long before that, Seward took charge and remained principal till the school closed in 1916.

For these forty years Seward C. Howe was monarch of all he surveyed. He made out the courses of Howe's Academy, organized the classes, and determined the relative time and importance of the various subjects. Able assistants advised, debated, counseled. Sometimes their views and methods were adopted, but Seward had the last word and did the deciding. There was no board of directors to hire and fire, no trustees to placate, no appeal from the

decisions made. If there ever was a one-man affair, from top to bottom, from stem to stern, it was Howe's Academy.

To write of Seward C. Howe is for me a filial act of piety. As a student under him for two years, as his assistant teacher for two years, and as business adviser and friend during all the years afterward till his death, I was in constant and intimate association with him and his problems. In the case of few men have I had such opportunity to know and study and admire. This portrait is a tribute to his memory.

The school which Seward C. Howe inherited from his dynamic father thrived and grew under his management unaided and alone, dependent upon tuition only, without either endowment or public grant. Its pupils ranked high for scholarship, but chiefly for the unique method of teaching they learned from the Howes. It attracted an extraordinary number of talented young people from this and neighboring counties and even from adjoining States. It held its own in competition with other like institutions, especially with Iowa Wesleyan College, then termed a University, which conducted through most of this period a preparatory department, covering substantially the same subjects as those taught in Howe's Academy.

On all public occasions Seward C. Howe was popular as a reader — of the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July, of Shakespearean selections on general literary programs. A professional elocutionist of the type then prevailing, he inspired many talented pupils to be public speakers and readers.

Mr. Howe was a small, slender man of a quick, nervous type. He was perhaps five feet eight inches tall and weighed at most one hundred and forty pounds. He had a mobile, expressive face, clear blue eyes, a high forehead, and regular features. He might easily be called a hand-

some man. In manner he was brisk and affable and made friends easily. He had a strong hold on his pupils, most of whom cherished for him a personal affection.

The huge, two-story building which housed the Academy was situated on East Monroe Street, Mount Pleasant, three blocks east of the public square. It had been originally built as a mill and long after Samuel L. Howe remodeled it to serve as a school building it was familiarly known as "The Old Mill". Part of the building was of brick and had been used as a residence by Samuel L. Howe and his family, and after his death by his widow. The remainder of the building was used for school purposes. The entrance hall was perhaps twelve feet wide and went straight north some forty feet to a side hall running west to an outside entrance. This was the service hall for access to the coal house in the yard to the west. A row of rooms to the west of the main hall were rented to students, and there was another row for a like purpose to the north of the service hall.

A wide stairway led to the schoolrooms above. The main assembly room occupied the entire north side of this second story, a room perhaps thirty-six by seventy feet in size. Here Mr. Howe conducted his classes, held all assemblies, directed the classes to the recitation rooms, and managed the school from the platform which extended across the entire west end of the room.

Two long and narrow classrooms, one on each side of the upper hall, extended from the assembly room to the south front of the building. Six stoves heated the rooms which were exposed to the north and west and were exceedingly cold in winter. The appetite of these stoves was alarming, at least to those whose duty it was to provide the fuel. There were comfortable desks in the main room, benches in the recitation rooms. There were blackboards enough, but very little other equipment — no charts, globes, or books of

any sort. As will be seen from the above description, the school did not depend on its material aids; it lived and grew only because of its methods and the enthusiasm which infused it.

This barn-like structure, erected in the late eighteen forties, served as the home of Howe's Academy for fifty years. Then came a startling change. The ancient feud between the Howes and Iowa Wesleyan had gradually lessened and in 1897 the Academy abandoned its historic home in the Old Mill and became the preparatory department of the College. The old structure on Monroe Street was torn down and the lots were sold for building purposes. Only a tablet now remains to mark its location.

But the union did not last. The two bodies were not congenial and Seward C. Howe was no subordinate. After five years of incompatibility he withdrew, bought the old German Presbyterian Church building on South Jefferson Street, remodeled it into a schoolhouse and residence, and resumed his former independent existence. It was there the school finally expired in 1916.

These were the physical settings for this school so different from all others — a formless collection of diverse interests, each striving in individual fashion for its own aims, without order or system until in the latter days when some semblance of order was attained. Many of the students were brilliant personalities; a few of course were dullards. Some were sent to the Academy because they would fit in nowhere else. Order may be "heaven's first law" in most situations but for a long time, in the seventies and early eighties, it did not apply in Howe's Academy. In legal language, its writs did not run there.

And yet beneath all this seeming disorder there was a bond of union surprising to the outsider, a mysterious spirit of cohesion which bound all these dissimilar personalities

together into a fighting, aggressive band. I have never observed greater unity of purpose and of loyalty than Howe's students manifested.

A day in the Academy was an exciting experience. At eight o'clock the wheels began to revolve, the hum of study and the buzz of classes were heard. With an increasing crescendo the activity mounted till noon, then resumed after a short luncheon interval and became a whirlwind of frenzied activity through the afternoon. The drill in recitation following recitation, the monotony of sing-song repetition of the classes in grammar and Latin, the march of hurrying feet going to and returning from classes, these made up a beehive of intense activity. There was no let-up in the program. Day after day, week after week the work proceeded during the entire school year.

A year was a collection of just such days, but with an added rhythm and zest. When the corn-husking was over in the fall, students came in droves. Big husky farm lads, girls with pink cheeks and stout hearts, dozens upon dozens, until you would have expected that the prairies would be denuded of their occupants. By Christmas the number had swelled to well over a hundred. By the middle of January two hundred and fifty young men and women fairly swarmed through the halls and classrooms, eager, noisy, ambitious, seeking and demanding entrance within the gates of knowledge. What to do with them became a problem. They surged over everything and created confusion by their very numbers. The teachers nearly wore themselves out in managing this flood of human energy. Good nature and good nature alone could avoid fatal congestion and avert catastrophe.

By March the flood began to recede. Each week dozens left to go back to the cornfields and kitchens and become intimate again with hard work. By June, when the roses

ran riot along hedge rows and over the garden walls, the fury of the storm had spent itself and a peaceful calm settled over the school. In lazy July and August the great building shimmered in the summer air and brooded over the past and slept and dreamed of the turbulent glory of future days.

Thus the drama repeated itself over and over through three-quarters of a century until the tragedy of its final chapter.

What was the distinguishing feature of schools such as Howe's Academy? It was a master passion of some gifted individual, filled with zeal for imparting his knowledge to others. This pattern knew no rules and followed no fixed design. It was in a sense a spiritual adventure and undertaking. It appealed to reason and also to the imagination. It had the ability to kindle in its pupils an intense passion for excellence that amounted almost to fanaticism. In short it was the flowering of a dynamic personality projected into an institution which followed no precedents but made its own rules and relied for success solely upon its own intrinsic worth.

Seward C. Howe was not a scholar in the narrow sense of the term, at least as employed in modern educational circles. He was well grounded in Latin, mathematics, and English grammar, but he did not care for research, either in historical meanings or in linguistic construction. That is, he did not study "more and more about less and less, until he knew everything about nothing". The classics, both ancient and modern, he loved and used in the school-room for their practical value in the study of language and for that only.

Nor was he interested in French or German or any other modern foreign language. These were not taught in his student days and he did not care to introduce them when he

became a teacher. From Latin across the centuries his affections leaped, landing only at Shakespeare and Milton on the way.

His methods of teaching were new and original, being those devised by his father in his Ohio years, but they were well suited to the formative years of pioneer Iowa. He did not care for science and had as few classes in science as possible. He did not like fixed courses. For a long time he resisted every argument in favor of establishing a college preparatory course. This was practically forced on him by the growing desire of his pupils to attend college after leaving the Academy.

To the last he preferred the unsystematized irregular work which allowed full liberty of individual choice. This meant that each pupil could progress as rapidly as his abilities and industry would permit, without regard to courses or class regularity. The method had many outstanding advantages. It was a paradise for the exceptional pupil, who ran as fast as he could down the lines of learning, undeterred by educational stop signs of any kind. And this did not discourage but rather encouraged the backward pupils who saw how much could be accomplished by hard work and application. It was, educationally speaking, a wild, lawless institution of learning, ignoring rules, a free-for-all, with success to the talented and daring pupil.

The system was cruelly hard on the teachers, but one of the cardinal principles upon which the Academy was run was to furnish a class for every pupil, whatever his degree of advancement or backwardness might be. Accordingly as new pupils entered from week to week new classes were formed until it was not uncommon to have six classes in arithmetic, four in grammar, three in Latin, and two in elocution going at the same time, besides one or more in the other common branches, and several in such higher

branches as general history, botany, natural philosophy, and geometry.

When it is remembered that some of the classes in arithmetic numbered from sixty to one hundred, and in grammar from twenty-five to sixty it can be realized the amount of work thrown upon the few teachers, Professor Howe, as he was called, and his assistants. The work day was long and hard, the enthusiasm boundless, the results eminently satisfactory.

The plan was brilliantly successful during the times when pioneer conditions prevailed. But by the opening of the twentieth century the scene was beginning to change. Earlier ways of living had about died out and educational methods had to meet new social conditions and ideals. The school system gradually hardened into forms that required organization, order, system, fixed courses of study, courses which were based on the general average of the pupils, a curriculum suited to this lower average. It was inevitable that the greater number of pupils attending secondary schools would sooner or later create a more highly regimented system than Howe's Academy could follow. Alas for the private school whose very existence depended on its individuality and variance from type. The struggle was long but one-sided and Howe's Academy proved no exception to the general law.

Seward C. Howe was an enthusiast for the classic tongues of Greece and Rome. So far as I know he never taught Greek in the Academy but Latin was perhaps his favorite subject. He knew the Latin grammar by heart and loved to have his pupils recite it over in sing-song fashion until it became a part of them. Modern teachers may sneer at this method of teaching a language, but I can testify from experience as to its virtues. This drill was no idle repetition but was similar to committing the multiplication table to

memory. Having absorbed declensions and conjugations in the sub-conscious mind one can recognize a word by its place, its number, gender, and case, or the conjugation and place in the conjugation to which it belongs. The slow process of reasoning about these data is wholly unnecessary when one has an accurate picture in his mind which makes them come at once into view as soon as he sees a word. How much time is saved in making translations and how much effort. Memory may be inferior to reasoning power in many fields of education, but it is decidedly superior where the relationship of words is purely arbitrary, arising not out of logic but out of the inherent genius of a language.

To many of us the study of the Latin classics was our first introduction to the beauties of ancient literature. The delicate passages from Horace, Cicero's blasts at Cataline, and Virgil's noble lines made a lasting impression on our minds, an impression which has remained with us through all the years.

The age-old conflict between the classics and modern subjects did not trouble Professor Howe. He was an ardent advocate of both and saw in this no inconsistency. Following his father's lead he placed great stress on grammar, the study of the English language. This he believed lies at the bottom of all true education. Without a basic knowledge of English and its various forms he did not believe it possible to be really proficient in any language. Hence it was that he laid such stress on parsing and diagramming, a phase of grammatical study now out of fashion. To follow this method one must study in detail the structure of the sentence with its various clauses and phrases and the part words play in expressing thought and attaining clarity. The rigorous logical analysis of great literature taught one to appreciate the literature as such,

but it also taught the student to become familiar with rules of grammatical construction without which even the greatest writer fails.

The modern criticism that this process makes of grammar a mechanical process, taking the perfume from the lily, the grace from a classic phrase, Howe did not consider important. When the analysis of a masterpiece, such as "Paradise Lost" or "Julius Caesar" was completed, the pupils almost without exception left the class with added admiration for the classic as a work of art. A scientist does not lose his appreciation of beauty when he analyzes a flower or a sunset. The mechanics in each case is synthesized into a whole which challenges admiration.

In all purely grammatical drill and studies the Howe Philotaxian Grammar was exclusively used. Samuel L. Howe wrote the first text and it was afterward published under the joint names of Samuel L. and Edward P. Howe. This was a highly original work and Howe pupils thought it a much more learned and logical treatise than the other grammars then in use. It laid a thorough groundwork for the rigorous study of grammatical forms and the English language in general.

Two features of Howe's Academy need to be mentioned to complete the picture. One was the night school designed to give special instruction to backward pupils. This was held twice a week during the crowded winter months, and for it no extra charge was made. The plan was justified by its results.

The other unusual feature was the class in elocution. This was a spectacular affair — rockets, pin wheels, Chinese candles, exploding stars, every variety of vocal fireworks. That was the fashion in those days, a fashion now outmoded. But it had its points. It developed grace and poise and self possession. How we used to love it. Every

emotion had its own facial expression, pose, and gesture. Defiance was thunderous, love soft and alluring, fear mysterious and awe inspiring. Professor Howe was a fine elocutionist of that type.

Seward C. Howe was in a certain degree a replica of his more famous father. Of about the same height and proportions he was built on less strenuous lines. There was no lightning flash of the eyes, no forbidding cast of countenance. He was smiling and agreeable, yet he could be severe enough upon occasion. Of course he had faults; he scolded often and at great length. It was not uncommon for him to lecture his class or the entire school for an hour, two hours at a time, all class activities suspended in the meantime. Those lectures were for the most part appeals to study harder, or were devoted to praising the school and its methods. Usually these harangues were listened to in silence, but gradually they built up in the pupils the same pride in the school, the same zeal in propagating its methods that the Howes themselves had.

The father, Samuel L. Howe, was imperious, masterful, domineering by the force of his personality. His character was well fitted to the pioneer conditions of the times, in which force was regarded as necessary, and indeed praiseworthy. He ruled with a rod of iron and woe betide the unlucky pupil who incurred his wrath by laziness or inattention. Work and hard work was the god of the machine. The younger Howe put the same emphasis on work and thoroughness, but he spoke in blander tones. He was no Jupiter thundering at his followers. Rather he was Apollo, pleading instead of commanding, and able to be persuasive even when scolding. He did not possess the force or fire necessary for dictators. Yet his frown was never looked upon lightly and no one purposely courted his indignation.

Even his failings were looked upon with tolerance by his pupils. Sometimes they felt a stricter discipline would be better, or a stricter code of morals. It was the settled theory of both Seward and his father that it was no function of the school to act the stern parent or the strict moral censor. Too much liberty was better than too much repression. Some people called Howe's Academy lax in discipline, some said it paid too little attention to morals, although no positive wrongdoing was charged. The answer was tolerance and confidence in the virtues of moral *laissez faire*, possibly at times excess confidence.

The Howe discipline was a revolt from the strait-laced regulation of individual conduct in the sectarian colleges of the day, a competition among orthodox institutions to see which could go the furthest in moral oversight over the youth in their charge. Perhaps the Howes leaned too much the other way. In either case their attitude furnished opportunity for criticism along moral lines.

In his later years Seward C. Howe became more pronounced in his religious convictions. He became a member of a local church and was faithful in attending its services. Yet he never gave up entirely the freedom of thought and action which had characterized the Academy from the beginning. It never became a sectarian school in any sense of the word.

Seward's domestic arrangements were well geared to his teaching duties. His home was diagonally across on the northeast corner of the schoolhouse block, just a minute's walk away. This was greatly appreciated especially in the busy winter months when the luncheon hour must be short. Mrs. Howe was an excellent cook and housekeeper, but her attention was chiefly engrossed in the school and its various activities. Having no children she centered her affections and much of her time on matters connected with the school.

She did much of the record work of listing pupils and their accounts for tuition and their scholastic records. Occasionally she taught some classes, although not adept at teaching. She was the general social leader at students' gatherings and acted as the representative of the school in the various social organizations of the city.

One other phase of Seward C. Howe's character must be noticed if we would have a life-size picture of the man. In business he was scarcely more than a child. He did not know what made the wheels go round in business. His was a one-track mind — that of a teacher. He had no ambition outside that field or outside his own particular type of teaching.

It must be said also that he was not, even in a limited sense, a philosopher. He never tried to solve puzzles, to unravel the mysteries that surround human beings, in short to explain things as they are. He never remarked on "this sorry scheme of things". Nor did he rail at Providence for creating or at least permitting so many evils and misfortunes. Why man was created as he is, and what to do about it, he did not discuss, perhaps did not even consider in his own mind.

He contented himself with meeting the problems of every day. The problems of the Academy were far more important to him than the problems of state or church. That is no doubt true of most men. In this respect he was nearer the norm of mine-run individuals than the few abstract thinkers who are never numerous in any group of people. And perhaps most men are happier to deal with concrete situations than they would or could be if they tried to speculate too much on final causes, or to "justify the ways of God to Man".

All in all he was a remarkable man, mild in personality, strong in his convictions as to the right methods against all

criticism and opposition. Others might theorize as to true pedagogical principles, he never doubted his own or wavered in using them. Devoted to his school and its success, he was lost in its routine, oblivious to most outside interests. To the last that school was his constant companion, his "pillar of cloud by day, of fire by night". Altogether he was a loyal, lovable, entertaining human being, who filled an important niche in the educational history of Iowa and an affectionate niche in the hearts of his countless friends.

ROGER S. GALER

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