

# THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXXV

ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1954

No. 11

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## Public Education in 1854

[This paper was read on the Centennial of the birth of the ISEA at Muscatine on May 10, 1954. — THE EDITOR]

Much has been said of the wisdom of the Founding Fathers of our great Nation. Their vision and foresight was particularly commendable when it came to providing for a free public school system that was "good enough for the richest and cheap enough for the poorest." Before the Constitution was adopted, before George Washington was elected president, the Congress of the Confederation adopted two great ordinances committing the Nation irrevocably to a system of free public education. First, the Congress of the Confederation, borrowing from the New England land system, provided in the Land Ordinance of 1785 that the sixteenth section of each township should be set aside for the benefit of common schools. Two years later, in the Ordinance of 1787, the Congress declared that:

Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.

This splendid statement in the Ordinance of 1787, although it referred particularly to the government of the Old Northwest Territory, served as the criterion which future legislators embodied in laws relating to education in Iowa. Iowa was attached to Michigan Territory in 1834 and thus fell under the orbit of the Northwest Ordinance. In his message to the legislature of the Territory of Michigan, Governor Stevens T. Mason explained the need for township organization in the Iowa District similar to that of Michigan to facilitate the establishment of schools. The same policy was pursued by the original Territory of Wisconsin, when, by an act of 1836, it provided that each of the new counties was to constitute a township. Governor Robert Lucas saw the need for the organization of townships when he declared before the Iowa Territorial legislature at Burlington, on November 12, 1838:

There is no subject to which I wish to call your attention more emphatically, than the subject of establishing, at the commencement of our political existence, a well digested system of common schools; and as a preparatory step . . . I urge upon your consideration the necessity of providing by law for the organization of townships. . . .

Without proper township regulation it will be extremely difficult, if not impracticable, to establish a regular school system. In most of the States where a common school system has been established by law, the trustees of townships are important agents in executing the provisions of the laws. To them are entrusted the care and superintendence

of the school lands of their respective townships, the division of townships into school districts, and various other duties relating to building school houses, the organization of school districts, and the support of schools in their respective townships.

As a result of the governor's recommendation the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa passed the first public school law which Robert Lucas signed on January 1, 1839.

One might continue to mention leaders in education. Such governors as John Chambers, James Clarke, Ansel Briggs, and Stephen Hempstead — were all concerned over the problem of our common schools. In his inaugural address in 1854 Governor James W. Grimes declared:

Government is established for the protection of the governed. . . . It is organized "to establish justice, promote the public welfare and secure the blessings of liberty." It is designed to foster the instincts of truth, justice and philanthropy, that are implanted in our very natures, and from which all constitutions and all laws derive their validity and value. It should afford moral as well as physical protection, by educating the rising generation; by encouraging industry and sobriety; by steadfastly adhering to the right; and by being ever true to the instincts of freedom and humanity.

To accomplish these high aims of government, the first requisite is ample provision for the education of the youth of the State. The common school fund of the State should be scrupulously preserved, and a more efficient system of common schools than we now have should be adopted. The State should see to it that the elements of education,

like the elements of universal nature, are above, around, and beneath all.

It is agreed that the safety and perpetuity of our republican institutions depends upon the diffusion of intelligence among the masses of the people. The statistics of the penitentiaries and alms-houses throughout the country, abundantly show, that education is the best preventive of pauperism and crime. They show, also, that the prevention of those evils is much less expensive than the punishment of the one, and the relief of the other. Education, too, is the great equalizer of human conditions. It places the poor on an equality with the rich. It subjects the appetites and passions of the rich to the restraints of reason and conscience, and thus prepares each for a career of usefulness and honor. Every consideration, therefore, of duty and policy, impels us to sustain the common schools of the State in the highest possible efficiency.

I am convinced that the public schools should be supported by taxation of property, and that the present *rate* system should be abolished. Under the present system of a *per capita* tax upon the scholars, the children of the poor are in a measure excluded from the benefit of the schools, whilst the children of the opulent are withdrawn from them to be educated in private institutions. Property is the only legitimate subject of taxation. It has its duties, as well as its rights. It needs the conservative influences of education, and should be made to pay for its own protection.

Such were the educational ideas propounded by James W. Grimes — one of the truly great moulders of Iowa history a century ago.

Let us turn now to the problem facing our public schools in 1854. These problems, curiously

enough, were not unlike those facing present-day educators. Briefly summed up they needed — more and better school buildings; competent and devoted teachers; and adequate funds for implementing the program. Because of its historical significance (and because a replica of the cabin stands today as a symbol of our educational heritage) a word should be said of the pioneer Iowa school.

The first school in Iowa was established in the Half-breed Tract in Lee County almost three years before the Black Hawk Purchase opened to permanent settlement on June 1, 1833. Settlers had followed Dr. Isaac Galland to his settlement at Nashville and by 1830 a typical pioneer community had sprung up, with such prominent families as those of Isaac R. Campbell, James and Samuel Brierly, W. P. Smith, and Abel Galland as the nucleus. These people realized the educational needs of their children and, as in most activities on the Iowa frontier, private initiative took the place of governmental activity.

The first school teacher in Iowa was Berryman Jennings. Born in Kentucky on June 16, 1807, Jennings established himself at Commerce (now Nauvoo), Illinois, when he was only twenty years old. Three years later Dr. Isaac Galland invited him over to his new settlement to teach a school for three months. Jennings received lodging, fuel, furniture, and board at the Galland home as com-

pensation, as well as the use of the doctor's medical books. The school opened in October, 1830.

According to Jennings the first schoolhouse in Iowa, like all other buildings in that new country, was a log cabin "built of round logs, or poles, notched close and mudded for comfort, logs cut out for doors and windows, and also for fire-places. The jamb back of the fire-places was of packed dirt, the chimney topped out with sticks and mud. This cabin like all others of that day was covered with clapboards. This was to economize time and nails, which were scarce and far between. There were no stoves in those days, and the fire-place was used for cooking as well as for comfort."

As we participate in this important dedicatory program we should all be reminded that John A. Parvin (the first president of the Iowa State Teachers Association) opened the first school in Muscatine County in May of 1839. Parvin rented a small log cabin for this enterprise and secured for compensation such sums as the parents paid him directly. He later served as president of School District No. 1 in Muscatine. Parvin was amply qualified — as a teacher, as an administrator, and because of his burning zeal for the cause of public education — to participate in the founding of the Iowa State Teachers Association, and to become its first president.

It was fitting that the meeting in 1854 should be

held in Muscatine for yet another reason. The future "Pearl City" of Iowa had early demonstrated its interest in public education. In 1850, for example, Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., had reported work in progress on a 2-story brick building in District No. 2 in Muscatine which was ready for occupation on May 12, 1851. This building measured 40 x 45 feet and cost \$2,500. Thus, Muscatine, which ranked third in population at the time, had exhibited in Superintendent Benton's opinion an enterprise that "must be appreciated, and cannot fail to produce the happiest results." Burlington, Dubuque, Keokuk, and Fort Madison had exhibited similar zeal.

It was one thing to erect a school. It was another thing to operate it — as the school directors quickly found out. G. B. Denison had been named principal of District No. 2 at a salary of \$500 per year. His two female assistants received \$250 and \$225 respectively. About one-third of the teachers' wages of \$975 was expected to come from the school fund but no one had any idea where the rest would come from. It was finally left to the Principal, Mr. Denison, who fixed upon the following assessment per pupil per term: Primary department \$1.50; Intermediate \$1.75; all higher departments \$2. Since there were three 14-week terms in a ten-month year the average cost per student was 12½ cents per week; decidedly inexpensive, considering modern baby-sitting prices.

Meanwhile District No. 1 in Muscatine commenced building a 2-story 40 x 60 foot brick building while Theodore S. Parvin was president of the board. This school was opened on March 7, 1853, with D. Franklin Wells, a graduate of the New York Normal School at Albany, serving as principal. In its First Annual Report the Board of Directors presented some of the problems facing Mr. Wells in School District No. 1 in Muscatine.

The house will seat but 240 scholars comfortably, while the average daily attendance has reached 200, showing the wisdom of the planners in erecting so commodious an edifice, which even now in a very few years will be too small to meet the wants of the District. The Directors have been liberal in their views in seating and furnishing the house with the best material in their reach, which might tend to add to the comfort of teacher or scholar, and facilitate the imparting of instruction.

There yet remain several improvements which should be completed at an early day: 1st. The roof (a pitch one) leaks and needs repairing, if not to be replaced with a new (tin) one. 2d. The lot needs to be enclosed so as to afford separate play grounds for the sexes, which would tend greatly to remove an objection now entertained by many against the school, because the sexes occupy the same play ground. 3rd. A wood house is needed to protect the wood from the weather and light fingered loafers. 4th. A cistern is also wanted, as water cannot be conveniently reached by digging.

And lastly, a *bell* is much needed to give regularity to the operations of the school. The Directors had assurance that a *generous* public would furnish a bell and TOWN

CLOCK and at a considerable expense erected a Tower to receive them, but when a subscription was handed around for this purpose the amount subscribed was not half sufficient to procure one, as a large proportion of the citizens of District No. 2, refused to contribute to put a clock upon *our* house when they had no Tower on theirs to receive one, and the members of an influential and wealthy church declined because the steeple of theirs was not selected as the place for the clock, notwithstanding the eligibility of the site of the school house is so manifest as to need no argument in its favor.

We now ask the question, in view of the great *public* utility of a town clock, shall these prejudices be laid aside, and the wants of the entire community be consulted, and a clock procured?

Mr. Wells continued as principal until 1856, when he was elected principal of the State Normal School at Iowa City. Since John A. Parvin was elected the first president of the Iowa State Teachers Association and D. Franklin Wells was named Secretary (and later twice president of the ISTA) their names are inextricably woven into the educational fabric of Muscatine, Iowa, and ISEA history.

James D. Eads became Superintendent of Public Instruction following the founding of the ISEA at Muscatine. Like Benton, Eads was deeply impressed with the enthusiasm of Iowans for education.

In many of the older counties that I have travelled through, the citizens have gone to work with a liberal and praiseworthy spirit in erecting large and commodious

buildings for educational purposes. The city of Keokuk takes the lead in having the finest building in the State, in the erection of which the citizens have expended nearly ten thousand dollars; and with a liberal spirit, they pay the Superintendent of the school eight hundred dollars per annum.

Fort Madison, Burlington, Muscatine, Davenport, Lyons, Anamosa, Colesburgh, Marion, Rochester, Tipton, Denmark, Primrose, West Point, Centerville, Oskaloosa, Cedar Falls, and many other towns, have erected buildings, which will stand as lasting monuments of the liberality of those engaged in so glorious an enterprise, and an honor to our young State.

Although fine schools were springing up all over Iowa the log cabin school still predominated on the eve of the founding of the ISTA. According to Supt. Benton's report there were 859 school houses in Iowa: 459 were log cabin, 297 frame, 91 brick, and 12 stone. The brick and stone school houses were located for the most part in the more populous centers — Keokuk, Fort Madison, Burlington, Muscatine, Davenport, Iowa City, and Dubuque. Muscatine County itself was typical of the well-populated counties; it had 3 brick, 1 stone, 11 frame, and four log cabin schools in 1854. Appanoose County, on the other hand, had 21 log cabin schools while Mills, Taylor, and Pottawattamie on the Missouri slope, each reported 3 log cabin schools. Polk County, which, like Appanoose, lay on the frontier of 1850, had 3 frame and 6 log cabin school houses at the opening of

1854. The average cost of these 859 schools was \$168, a price which was probably just as burdensome to the pioneers as the cost of modern construction.

What of the teachers back in 1854? Mr. Benton recorded a total of 1,339 school teachers of whom 740 were males and 599 were females. Most of these teachers were young. Out of a random group of 100 teachers — 32% were under 21, while 88% were under 32 years. Only 3% were 60 and over — the oldest being 73. Of a list of 556 teachers whose place of birth was reported, Ohio led with 142 teachers while New York stood second with 78. Only one Iowa-born teacher was recorded by Superintendent Benton E. Aimes of Garnavillo. Several foreign lands were represented among these teachers, notably Ireland, England, Scotland, Denmark, and Canada. Since all of us are interested in salaries one should note that the average monthly compensation for male teachers was \$19.73 while the average female received only \$9.79. The need for better salaries was recognized by James D. Eads in 1854. After “earnestly” recommending the employment of more female teachers to train the “plastic” minds of children in the Common Schools, Superintendent Eads strongly condemned teachers’ salaries of 1854.

I am well aware that many districts are newly organized, and with a limited number of families, can ill afford the

expense incurred in the erection of school houses, and in the support of free schools. Still, making due allowance for these, and other unavoidable causes, it is painfully evident that the profession of teaching has not yet assumed its true position in the estimation of the great mass of our citizens. It is to be deplored that this, which should be the most prominent, as it is the most important, of all the learned professions, is made to yield in point of position in favor of other and far less worthy objects. And while in the various departments of manual labor, we do not hesitate to pay from one to three dollars per day for services rendered; and while also, we pay to our clergy salaries of from three hundred to twelve hundred dollars per annum; and to the legal and medical professions, whatever they choose to charge, the teacher whose high duties in reference to their controlling influence upon human destiny overshadows them all in the magnitude and importance of their results, must be content with a most shamefully inadequate and meagre compensation. I trust, however, that we shall soon witness a better appreciation of the services of teachers, throughout the different sections of our State.

In addition to competent, well-paid teachers, Superintendent of Public Instruction James D. Eads favored adequate textbooks that would be "best adapted to the wants and interests of the people at large, without any regard to the many solicitations from publishers and book agents." The books he recommended, Eads claimed, were used in most of the Middle Atlantic, Western, and Southern states, and had received the approval of many of the "most eminent educators and friends of education" in the United States.

Among the texts listed were Pinneo's *Primary*

*Grammar and Analytical Grammar*; Mitchell's *School Geography, Universal Atlas, and Series of Large Outline Maps*; R. G. Parker's *Natural & Experimental Philosophy*; Burritt's *Atlas of the Heavens*; Wood's *Class Book of Botany*; Ray's *Arithmetic* (three texts) and Ray's *Algebra* (two texts); Foster's *Book-Keeping*; Parley's *Illustrated History*; Emma Willard's *History of the United States and Universal History*; McGuffey's *Eclectic Reader* (five texts); Hemans' *Reader for Young Ladies*; McGuffey's *Eclectic Spelling Book*; and James Bayard's *Exposition of the Constitution of the United States*. These books, Eads concluded, contained "all that is calculated to elevate the moral character of the rising generation, without the least sectarian bias; and I think this one of the most important features in any work gotten up for a school book, that is a candidate for public favor."

Superintendent Eads especially urged the use of Webster's Dictionaries. "They have a character that no other works of the kind ever attained in this country. In fact, they stand without a rival in the annals of English lexicography. His Unabridged Dictionary is emphatically the greatest work of the age, and I respectfully ask at your hands the power to place one copy of this work in every School District in the State, as it is the only correct defining dictionary in the English language, and if we wish the teachers and pupils to

understand the meaning of technical terms and words hard to be understood, then let us place this great American work upon the desk of every public school teacher in the State."

If John A. Parvin and D. Franklin Wells could be present at this significant Centennial dedication they would be astounded at the giant strides made in public education in the space of 100 years.

In 1854 there were 1,339 teachers; now there are 24,082, almost all of whom are identified with the great educational organization founded in Muscatine a century ago.

In 1854 there were 859 school houses valued at \$144,978; now there are 7,990 schools valued at \$204,634,737.04.

In 1854 there were 44,442 scholars in Iowa; now there are 542,000 pupils in our public schools and it has been estimated that there will be 635,000 in 1958, or almost double the total population of Iowa a century ago.

In 1854 there was no State University of Iowa, no Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, no Iowa State Teachers College; now 19,388 students attend these three great institutions which rank with the finest in the land. This represents more than half of the total college enrollment of 36,681 enrolled in Iowa colleges in 1954.

In 1854 there were only a few straggling private colleges in Iowa (Iowa College at Daven-

port and Iowa Wesleyan at Mt. Pleasant); today twenty-two are attended by 13,660 students. In addition, 3,633 students attend junior colleges and technical schools.

Then as now, education was the biggest and most important single industry in the State of Iowa. It involves more people, enters more homes, and affects more lives than any other single activity. Measured in terms of teachers, students, school board officials, and directors, Parent-Teacher Associations, janitors, custodians, bus drivers, and school nurses, there are very few homes in Iowa that are not directly affected by public education. The Iowa State Education Association has been an important, indeed a decisive factor, in achieving these gains.

Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., left his post as Superintendent of Public Instruction a few weeks after the ISTA met in Muscatine. The existence of this association as well as his six years in the superintendency must have done much to strengthen his faith in the future of the common school. With prophetic vision Benton declared:

There was a period when I entertained serious misgivings as to its fate, but time has dissipated my fears. Its destiny is now fixed, and a bright future awaits it. It is emphatically an institution of the people, and the people will sustain it. The civil commotions to which all governments are more or less subject, may retard its progress, but cannot prostrate it. It is founded upon the principles of justice and philanthropy, and presents a phalanx of

moral and intellectual grandeur which defies the attacks of its opponents. Its object is the development of the human mind — the education of the masses — the noblest work that can engross the attention of a rational being. Our state is admirably adapted to a system of public schools. We have but a very small proportion of unproductive lands, and our population will be dense and compact, and the time will come when Iowa will rank second to no State in the Union for educational facilities, both public and private.

The century that has elapsed since Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., made his 1854 report has borne out the wisdom of his prophecy. The great names in the cause of public education in Iowa read like a veritable Who's Who in Iowa history. With such consecrated leadership, stemming from dynamic and inspired men and women, public education advanced steadily, and the Hawkeye State forged its way to the forefront among the states of the Union.

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