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Iowa Schools in 1846

The Ordinance of 1787 contained one sentence of imperishable significance: "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 principle Iowa inherited through the Territories of Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

The Territory of Iowa was settled by people more varied in backgrounds than were the first settlers in Ohio; many of the Iowa settlers were second generation pioneers, once removed, at least, from the schools of the older States. For the benefit of these early settlers, elementary schools of various kinds were established, where pioneer children clad in homespun sat on rough benches of split logs to learn the three R's. Later academies, select schools, and colleges were provided.

Before we survey the schools of the white children a century ago we may, perhaps, give a hur-

ried glance at a school maintained in Iowa by the Federal government for Indian children.

In the treaty with the Winnebago Indians in 1832 the United States had agreed to "erect a suitable building, or buildings with a garden and a field attached, somewhere near Fort Crawford, or Prairie du Chien, and establish and maintain therein, for the term of twenty-seven years, a school for the education, including clothing, board, and lodging, of such Winnebago children as may be voluntarily sent to it: . . . said children to be taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, gardening, agriculture, carding, spinning, weaving, and sewing, according to their ages and sexes, and such other branches of useful knowledge as the President of the United States may prescribe". This was, perhaps, the earliest example of the study of agriculture and home economics in the Middle West. The annual cost of this school was not to exceed \$3,000.

Joseph M. Street selected a site for the Winnebago school on the Yellow River, and in 1834 a substantial log schoolhouse was erected. Meanwhile, President Andrew Jackson appointed his friend, David Lowry, D. D., a minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, as teacher. In 1840, because of changing conditions, the sub-agent was instructed to sell the agency and the

school for what they would bring, and a new agency and school were established farther westward, on the Turkey River, at a point four or five miles southeast of Fort Atkinson. By 1845 the number of pupils had increased to 166 — 83 boys and 83 girls — but the average daily attendance was only about sixty.

Concerning this unique school for the Indians, J. B. Newhall, writing optimistically in 1846, said: "The zeal evinced in behalf of these untutored children, and the efforts made in imparting instruction have been attended with the happiest results. Showing conclusively that the 'children of the forest' are equally as susceptible of acquiring an education as the more favored ones of the Anglo-Saxon race. From 60 to 120 scholars are in daily attendance. Their aptness in acquiring a knowledge of geography, and the various branches of learning, is truly astonishing. All the usual branches of education commonly taught in our schools and seminaries are taught here.

"Connected with the school is the department of Domestic Economy, at present under the superintendence of Mrs. A. Lockwood, late of Bloomington. This lady will be favorably remembered, by many citizens of Iowa, as the former attentive hostess of the 'Burlington House', Burlington, Iowa. All the females of the establishment devote

a portion of each day in acquiring a knowledge of needle work of all descriptions. This branch of the institution, under its present worthy matroness, furnishes all the clothing necessary for the school children. Some 20 or 30 girls spend a considerable portion of each day in this highly useful and excellent department."

In 1848 the Winnebagoes moved into Minnesota, and the Winnebago school on the Turkey River was abandoned. Educational activities were henceforth to be largely concerned with white children.

Perhaps Professor Jesse Macy of Grinnell College gave the best description of early schools when he wrote in 1898: "In each neighborhood, as soon as there were enough children of school-age, a meeting of the citizens was called, a place and plan for a school-house determined upon, a day set for building, and at the appointed time they all came out and built. Then they hired a teacher and kept up the school as best they could."

This procedure, it will be noted, was not based upon any law, except the economic law of supply and demand. Yet school laws had been passed, more of them, indeed, than were needed. As early as January, 1839, the Territorial Legislative Assembly had passed a law which provided for the establishment of common schools in each county

“which shall be open and free for every class of white citizens between the ages of four and twenty-one years”.

“The county board”, it was further provided, “shall from time to time form such districts in their respective counties, whenever a petition may be presented for that purpose by a majority of the voters resident within such contemplated district.” Provision was also made for the election of “three trustees, one clerk, one treasurer, one assessor, and one collector” — seven officers in all.

The lawmakers of those early days, as Theodore S. Parvin said, “knew quite well, at the time they framed their laws, that there were no public schools and could not be” in the greater part of Iowa, for some years to come. But “they believed that the passing of good school-laws would have the effect of encouraging immigration. The statutes expressed a longing of the people for a time when there would be seven persons living near enough together on these prairies fitted to hold school offices and manage a public school in their various neighborhoods.”

There was little uniformity in methods of support of elementary schools in Iowa in 1846. A group of neighbors might coöperate in providing a log cabin and a teacher. Sometimes an individual set up a school supported by tuition.

The school law of 1839 provided for a tax of one-half of one per cent, with the provision, however, that no person should be taxed in excess of \$10 per year. This income usually had to be supplemented by "rates" charged the patrons on the basis of the number of pupils sent to the school. This was used to pay the teacher; schoolhouses were usually built from the property tax alone. In some instances various methods of school support may have existed in the same community, either side by side in different schools, or one supplementing the other in the same school.

The typical schoolhouse of one hundred years ago was built of logs, with a fireplace at one end. "The seats were long benches running the entire length of the room, with a wide plank next to the wall, which served as a desk". There was, of course, a total lack of school apparatus with the exception of a board some two feet wide by four feet long, which was called a "blackboard", although the paint scarcely justified the name.

In the morning when the pupils arrived at school they might find a bright fire burning in the big fireplace. The schoolmaster might be "setting copy" for the pupils from passages of scripture or from well-known maxims; or he might be making pens from goose quills, as was the custom, for the steel pen was not yet in common use in Iowa.

The curriculum was rather limited, but it was rigorously pursued. A writer who remembered those early days said some years later: "Our main battles were with the three R's, and I am fully persuaded that we were able to read as intelligently, to write as legibly, and to spell better than the average high school graduate of today, while our arithmetics were things to be studied, not guessed at, things to be digested, not picked at. Grammar, composition and literature were not deemed essential and were utterly neglected."

Textbooks in pioneer days were neither numerous nor uniform, but they were the standard books of well-known authors. Outstanding among them were the McGuffey reader, Ray's arithmetic, an elementary speller, Smith's geography, and Smith's or Kirkham's grammar if, indeed, a grammar were used. In addition to these, one book company advertised "Blank books from Memorandums to Ledgers; writing and letter paper, quills, steel pens, inks, &c."

In some schools arithmetic seemed to hold the chief place of interest, and frequently the teacher took great pride in propounding original problems. One teacher, it was said, "kept every one wide awake all the time. His long suit was fish, not to eat but to use as bait for arithmetic". If he were not weighing fish, it might be butter. "How

much would a six inch butter ball weigh, if a three inch ball weighed so much?" Geography lessons and even arithmetic problems were sometimes stated in rhyme to stimulate interest.

On Friday afternoon a spelling match was often held "and pieces spoken." As a social diversion spelling schools were held several times during the winter in competition with other schools. Parents and friends often joined in these contests, which, while friendly, often aroused the liveliest enthusiasm.

Teachers were not well qualified and they were poorly paid. As a part of their compensation they "boarded round" among the families whose children they taught. All in all elementary schools in 1846 were primitive — a far, far cry from the well-equipped institutions of today.

But Iowans looked beyond these elementary schools, realizing that a higher education increased a young man's chance to achieve leadership in the community and that educated mothers were an equally important asset. Out of this ambition grew the widely publicized seminaries, academies, select schools, and colleges which dotted Iowa in 1846. Some were well established with substantial buildings and teachers of ability and training, who later came to be men of renown.

In the years between 1838 and 1846 incorpora-

tion acts were adopted for academies and seminaries at Antwerp, Augusta, Bentonsport, Burlington, Davenport, Denmark, Dewitt, Dubuque, Farmington, Fort Madison, Grandview, Iowa City, Keosauqua, Mount Pleasant, Parkhurst, Wapello, and West Point. St. Raphael's Seminary, founded at Dubuque in 1839, had a melange in 1846 of theological students, boys of high school age, a sprinkling of boys of the Sioux Indian tribe, and a few half-breeds. Among the schools designated as academies were Clinton Academy at Dewitt, Denmark Academy, Farmington Academy, Howe's Academy at Mount Pleasant, Jefferson Academy in Des Moines County, the Mechanics' Academy at Iowa City, and the West Point Academy. Of these, Denmark Academy, Howe's Academy, West Point Academy, the Mechanics' Academy, and perhaps a few others were operating in 1846.

There were also a considerable number of schools that were designated either as a "college" or a "university", although not all of the work was done on the college level. Among such institutions in 1846 were Burlington University, Iowa College at Davenport, Iowa City College, Iowa City University, and Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute. Two of these schools in particular are of interest in this centennial year.

The Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute, incorporated in 1844 to take the place of the Mount Pleasant Literary Institute, became Iowa Wesleyan College, the oldest college in Iowa. The first college building erected in Iowa — "Pioneer Hall" — is still preserved on the Iowa Wesleyan campus. Iowa College established at Davenport, in 1846, chiefly through the interest and efforts of members of the Iowa Band, was later moved to Grinnell and became Grinnell College.

Thus if one would take a retrospective view of schools as they were in Iowa in 1846, he would note a substantial school for Indian children, elementary schools here and there for the benefit of children of the pioneers, and a few well-planned academies and colleges for the more advanced students. The schools were primitive in character, but together they constituted a fair beginning in the education of the Territory and the State.

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