

## Phoebe W. Sudlow

A bronze marker at the Sudlow Intermediate School of Davenport bears this inscription:

PHEBE W. SUDLOW  
1831 - 1922  
SUPERINTENDENT  
DAVENPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
1874 - 1878  
FIRST WOMAN CITY SUPERINTENDENT  
OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
IN THE UNITED STATES

This plaque, presented to the school by the Hannah Caldwell Chapter of the D.A.R. on October 1, 1936, pays tribute to an earnest, faithful teacher who taught in Iowa for more than a quarter of a century. To Phoebe W. Sudlow belongs the honor of having been elected first woman principal and the first woman superintendent of public schools in the United States. In addition, she was the first woman to serve as president of the Iowa State Teachers Association.

Phoebe W. Sudlow was born at Poughkeepsie, New York, on July 11, 1831, the daughter of Richard and Hannah Sudlow. With her family she moved to Ohio while she was yet a child.

There the Sudlows settled near the town of Nelsonville and there Phoebe grew to womanhood. She received her elementary education at a little country school near her home, and later attended an academy at Athens, Ohio. At fifteen she began her teaching career in the small log schoolhouse near her home where she herself had studied as a child.

The Sudlows moved to Iowa in 1856 and settled at Round Grove in Scott County. There Phoebe resumed her teaching career, instructing pupils at the Round Grove school until her work attracted the attention of Abram S. Kissell, Scott County superintendent of schools and superintendent of the Davenport city schools. Mr. Kissell was instrumental in bringing Phoebe Sudlow to Davenport in the fall of 1858 to become assistant in sub-district No. 5.

The following year Miss Sudlow was named assistant principal at Grammar School No. 2 and District School No. 3, with an annual salary of \$350. A year later she became principal of these schools — reputedly the first woman principal of a public school in the United States — at an annual salary of \$400. She continued in this position until 1866, when she turned her full attention to serving as principal of Grammar School No. 3.

On April 21, 1869, a convention composed of

about forty county superintendents and as many more public school superintendents, principals, and teachers met in Des Moines to consider current educational problems. Abram S. Kissell, then serving as State Superintendent of Public Instruction, presided over this meeting and Phoebe W. Sudlow presented an "illustrative" lesson on the teaching of language in the schools.

Miss Sudlow took another step in her teaching career when she became principal of the Davenport Training School for Teachers in 1872. Her experience and long service in various grades of school work and her tact and skill as a teacher made her well fitted for this position. In 1873 she also served as principal of Grammar School No. 8. By this time her annual salary had increased to the fabulous sum of \$1200.

The year 1874 was a highlight in Phoebe Sudlow's career, for on June 19, 1874, she was unanimously chosen city superintendent of schools by the Davenport board of education. The idea of a "lady" superintendent seems to have been a novelty to Davenport citizens, but Miss Sudlow soon proved herself capable of carrying her responsibilities with such marked ability that the townspeople were generous in their praise of her. A booklet published by the Citizens' Association of Davenport in 1874 stated: "All the public schools

of the city are now under the charge of a *lady* Superintendent, who is fully competent for her responsible duties."

Additional honors came to Phoebe Sudlow while she was serving as Davenport superintendent. In 1876 she was elected president of the Iowa State Teachers Association, winning over two highly respected men candidates, Professor Henry Sabin, city superintendent from Clinton, and Professor Amos N. Currier of the State University of Iowa. As the first woman president of the I.S.T.A. she presided over the 1877 meeting held at Cedar Rapids on December 26-28. In her inaugural address at the opening session she spent some time in discussing the importance of kindergartens in the public schools, the value of industrial and technical education, the advantages of good lighting in the classrooms, and the place of women in the educational system.

At the 1878 commencement services at Cornell College, Miss Sudlow was again honored when she was awarded the honorary degree of Master of Arts. That summer she resigned from the Davenport superintendency to become professor of English Language and Literature at the State University of Iowa. Her resignation was accepted with regret and a Davenport editor wrote: "We do not hesitate to affirm that at no period during

the past twenty years has there been such absolute freedom from complaint, disaffection, jealousies or friction among the teachers as during the years in which Miss Sudlow has been Superintendent. Certainly, also, our schools have never given better evidence than now of thoroughly efficient instruction, or of real progress, on the part of pupils."

The *Iowa Normal Monthly*, published at Dubuque, July, 1878, said:

"Miss P. W. Sudlow, the lady who has so successfully conducted the Davenport schools for the past few years, has been elected to a professorship in the State University, with the full rank and pay of other professors. Every institution of this kind should have at least one lady in its faculty; and we know of no one more worthy to fill the place than Miss Sudlow."

Phoebe Sudlow taught at the University until 1881 when she was forced to resign because of ill health. At her leaving, members of the University faculty held an informal meeting and expressed regret at her retirement. On behalf of the faculty President Josiah L. Pickard presented her with a Paris clock, a token of friendship and appreciation.

After Phoebe Sudlow returned to Davenport in 1881 she seems to have held an interest in the

Fluke & Co. Bookstore. The Davenport city directories for 1882-1883 and 1885-1886 indicate that W. H. Fluke and Miss P. W. Sudlow were joint owners of a store at 317 Brady Street. In 1888 Miss Sudlow was again called into service in the Davenport public school system as principal of School No. 1. She appears to have taught only one year. After that she retired from school life to devote her time to her home and community.

In 1889 she organized "The Club of '89", one of the first women's organizations to be formed in Davenport, and for some time she served as president of this group. She was also active in the Ladies' Industrial Relief Society, serving as its president for fifteen consecutive years. She was a loyal member of the Methodist Episcopal Church and devoted much time to the Women's Missionary Society and to the church's Sunday school.

On June 14, 1921, when Phoebe Sudlow was nearing her ninetieth birthday, the Davenport board of education voted to change the name of "East Intermediate School" to "Phoebe W. Sudlow Intermediate School" in her honor. This was to be "a memorial befitting her superior character, her ennobling influence and her dignified example". The action came about following a resolution filed by the Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, the

Chamber of Commerce, the Women's Club, and the Club of '89.

One year later, on June 8, 1922, Phoebe W. Sudlow died at her home in Davenport. An obituary in the Davenport *Times* paid tribute to this woman who had expended so much time and energy in serving her community. She had been more than a teacher. She had reached out to the community as a whole and had given much to her city in unselfish service.

The story of Phoebe Sudlow's life would not be complete without a brief consideration of her attitudes and beliefs — the ideals by which she lived. She always maintained the attitude of a student. Although her formal education had been limited, her favorite reply to the question, "Where did you receive your education?" was, "All along the way."

Phoebe Sudlow was a vigorous exponent of women's rights. When she was first appointed to the principalship of School No. 3 in Davenport, the matter of equal salaries for men and women arose. Miss Sudlow took the ground that women doing equal work with men should receive equal salaries. The Davenport school board was at first unconvinced by this argument, but at Miss Sudlow's insistence finally acquiesced, thus setting a precedent which had influence not only in Daven-

port, but throughout the Middle West. Further evidence of her belief that men and women should have equal rights as educators is found in her inaugural address as president of the Iowa State Teachers Association, when she stated: "I cannot understand why equal attainment, equal culture, and equal strength of purpose and will should not have equal influence whether in man or woman."

In this same address Phoebe Sudlow gave her own aims in teaching: "Woman, in professional work, must learn to separate herself more from other seeming duties; to invest more as capital; to expect less in the present, and to provide more wisely for future usefulness and preferment. She must continue the work of preparation till her views shall be more comprehensive, and her professional aims and plans more far-reaching. She must be more eager to *become* than to *have*, must understand that *being* rather than *doing* is the 'better part', must tarry longer in the upbuilding and furnishing of a true and noble self-hood, not for self, but for service."

Herein are embodied the ideals which made Phoebe W. Sudlow a worthy teacher, a valuable citizen, and a distinguished woman.

CORNELIA MALLET BARNHART