

The Mind and the Soil

On the evening of February 18, 1859, four men met in Cedar Falls to perfect the organization of a society fitted to the needs of an agricultural community which was just emerging from its earliest stage of pioneering. Only six years had elapsed since the village had been platted. The two aims suggested in the title adopted, The Cedar Valley Horticultural and Literary Society, lay close to the heart of Peter Melendy, its father and founder. For three years this pioneer town-builder had either promoted or shared responsibility for every project that furthered the industrial, agrarian, and cultural needs of Cedar Falls and its environs. He endeavored to improve standards of living whether it meant the establishment of a new chair and bedstead factory or loaning to the neighbors his own copies of *The Ohio Farmer* or of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Peter Melendy saw in the establishment of the Horticultural and Literary Society the first step toward making Cedar Falls a city of gardens. The word garden he constantly used in the English sense — the home plot, hedged in for protection from straying stock, and holding in its enclo-

sure ornamental shrubs, shade trees, and flowers, a kitchen garden, and an orchard. For many years his home, now the property of Roger Leavitt at Washington and Eleventh streets, but then occupying most of the square, was the "show garden" of Cedar Falls. He, furthermore, desired to see his fellow townsmen become lovers of books and of reading; and, largely through the foresight of this man, residents of Cedar Falls have had access to a library for nearly eighty years.

At the first meeting of the Horticultural and Literary Society, Peter Melendy was elected president; Dempsey Overman, vice-president; J. H. Brown, secretary; and G. M. Harris, treasurer. Although other officers changed frequently, the Society never had but one president, Peter Melendy, who served until January 13, 1865, when the Society merged into the new Library Association. Over this body he also presided for a full decade.

Throughout its entire history the Society maintained its headquarters in the Overman Block, then the most conspicuous three-story brick building on Main Street, located on the present site of the Phoenix Building almost opposite the Black Hawk Hotel. For the Society, this building possessed a number of advantages. On the top floor, Overman Hall, eighty feet long and forty-four

wide, furnished ample space for community "festivities" and for the lecture courses fostered by the Society. When needed, several adjoining rooms could be thrown together for the fortnightly exhibitions of fruit, flowers, and vegetables, which were held during the summer months. Thirteen months after its organization an unexpected advantage, equally favorable to the Society, occurred on March 13, 1860, when H. A. and George D. Perkins rented quarters on the ground floor, and began the publication of the *Cedar Falls Gazette*.

These young editors shared the gardening and literary enthusiasms of Peter Melendy and of the Horticultural Society, as it was then commonly designated. Beginning with the first issue, the editorial columns of the *Gazette* published a history of the Society's first year, restated its aims of arousing a spirit of emulation among property owners for the beautifying and landscaping of urban and rural homes, and of developing a cultural appreciation of learning and of literature. The editors, furthermore, congratulated their subscribers upon the fact that Peter Melendy would edit a two-column section under the caption of FIELD AND GARDEN which, they declared, would supply gardeners and farmers with more material designed to promote scientific horticulture than could be found in any other paper printed in Iowa.

“The mind and the soil is our platform and we would make a thorough business of each, could we have our way”, declared Peter Melendy in his FIELD AND GARDEN column, thus summing up his two chief aspirations in founding the Horticultural and Literary Society. With a faith in the future of the Cedar Valley amounting almost to an obsession, he envisaged opportunity on every side, yet he succeeded in tempering his aspirations with a sane practicality. Through his own experimentation, through FIELD AND GARDEN, and through the Horticultural Society, he projected his slogan: the mind and the soil.

February, 1859, proved to be an auspicious month for the Society's inception, for by the time the constitution had been drawn up and approved, an early spring was at hand. At a meeting in March the officers decided upon exhibitions of two kinds. First, they proposed to invite all nurserymen and amateur gardeners in the vicinity to select their choice specimens of fruit, flowers, and vegetables and to exhibit them in the Society's rooms in Overman Hall on alternate Friday evenings from late spring until autumn. The second plan was to offer three special prizes to gardeners who made the greatest progress in improving their premises throughout the growing season of 1859.

For several years the citizens manifested con-

siderable interest both in contributing to the exhibits and in coming out in numbers to view the products of the newly turned prairie soil. As early as March that year the Society announced the premiums. Every one was urged to contribute, children as well as adults. For these fortnightly occasions, small money prizes were offered, usually fifty cents for the first and twenty-five cents for the second, but a "handsomely designed wreath" or an unusual "floral display" was awarded as much as a dollar and a half. If the treasury warranted the expenditure, a beautiful pot of petunias or a child's offering of wake robins or late fall asters sometimes received an extra and unadvertised honorarium.

On March 22, 1861, to take a specific illustration, the committee on premiums sent to the *Gazette* a list for the coming season containing no less than thirty-eight entries under four general headings. The first of these with six subdivisions dealt with the improvement of gardens as a whole with particular emphasis upon "ornamental planting of shrubbery and shade trees". The second included twenty-five vegetable entries, among them egg plant, pepper grass, and ground cherries. Here the points for judging were to be quality and earliness in ripening. In the third place four prizes were offered for the finest baskets of wild

and of cultivated flowers; while the last group included awards for "the earliest and best plates" of seven varieties of berries and of small fruit.

Judges were appointed for each of these bi-monthly affairs and considerable publicity was given to the winners. The *Gazette* never failed to give a full account of the exhibitions and frequently complimented not only the prize-winners but also the taste manifested in arranging effectively the roses and lilies, the radishes and other summer vegetables. Generally for these community gatherings a program of declamations with a generous proportion of vocal and instrumental music added variety to the entertainment.

Significance of the interests of the Society's founders is inherent in the very first list of prizes for 1859, which definitely encouraged citizens to turn their rather heterogeneous properties into harmonious units. "Sow blue grass where the old woodpile was; plant vines and shrubs; give your son a taste for cultivating the soil." Thus admonished by Peter Melendy, the members sought to reproduce in the growing village on the Cedar the gardens which they knew best in Old England, in New England, or in Virginia. To effect this, the committee offered a first and second prize for "the best arranged dooryard", one for "the best vegetable garden", and a third for "the best combined

vegetable and fruit garden". A committee of three was instructed to visit, during the spring and again in late summer, all the gardens entered in these three lists. For landscaping no money prize, which could be frittered away, was offered, but instead a diploma was promised to the winners.

When the three judges revisited the gardens in August of 1859, they awarded the first honors for the "best arranged door yard" to William Overman. After this "visiting-gardens" trip the committee members reported to the Horticultural Society that they had counted at William Overman's home "sixteen varieties of shade and ornamental trees", at John Garrison's fifteen kinds of vegetables, and at Mrs. A. S. Mitts's eighty different types of native and cultivated flowering plants.

By November, 1859, besides enlisting public interest in gardening, the Horticultural and Literary Society had introduced the panel plan of the lyceum, had arranged for a substantial lecture course, and had mapped out plans for founding and maintaining a library. During the winter months the Society began to consider the scientific side of horticulture, making inquiries concerning relative soil values, grafting, and budding, and the introduction of new varieties of vegetables and fruits, especially berries. The members listened

frequently to essays prepared by their own members on such topics as "The Preparation of Hot Beds", "Rural Embellishments", and "Homes in the West". Of these, the most argued subject dealt with potato growing in the vicinity. As a result, early in 1862, a committee of four assumed the responsibility for carrying out a series of experiments and of reporting their findings to the entire Society in the autumn. Such projects as keeping the meteorological records and the establishment of a museum were started but nothing came of them.

When the Civil War began to challenge the traditional attitudes of all thoughtful Americans, and when this particular farming community strove to send commodities east and south, other topics tended to crowd gardening from its early position of chief interest. The Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad, now the Illinois Central, reached Cedar Falls in 1861, and its terminus remained there throughout the war. Farmers a hundred miles away drove ox teams to the Overman mills to have their grain ground into flour and meal. In 1862 the Cedar Falls *Gazette* printed statistics to show that the output of these mills averaged one hundred barrels a day; that the hotels had had twenty-five thousand registrants, that four thousand railroad tickets had been sold, and that a

million dollars in bankable funds had passed through the express office.

Under war conditions such changes tended to hasten the development of the isolated prairie village as well as to quicken activity and thought. The people turned from topics relating to the soil and began to announce at least a week in advance panel discussions on such timely questions as: "Does the press control politics?" "Shall the government of the United States be supported by direct taxation?" "Should Iowa abolish her present liquor law and in its place establish an excise tax?" "Can the War be terminated and permanent peace be established by the abolition of slavery?" They, no doubt, settled none of these problems but the adventurous impact of mind upon mind counteracted the routine life of the village and gave the participants an awareness of their relation to the State and to the Nation.

Although the meetings were supposed to begin promptly at seven and close at nine, the hands of the clock often pointed to ten or later before the men lighted their lanterns to guide them through the darkness of the streets. At first the presiding officer gave the sole decision, but as the subjects grew more diverse and the discussions more animated, Peter Melendy begged for assistance and was permitted to appoint judges for each evening.

Some who participated most frequently were George D. Perkins, later to earn State-wide recognition as the editor of the *Sioux City Journal*, A. F. Brown and J. B. Powers, both State Senators, and the Presbyterian and Congregational ministers, W. Porterfield and L. B. Fifield.

In securing furniture for their assembly rooms, the members displayed the pride of new home owners. Gradually their headquarters were equipped with "twenty settees, three appropriate stands", a carpet for the speaker's platform, a book case, and a geological cabinet. For this equipment the money was derived partly from dues (at first fifty cents and later increased to a dollar), and partly from the proceeds of "festivities". The cost of furniture, premiums, and printing, however, made demands upon the treasury which the modest dues were unable to meet. The rent paid to the Overman brothers varied from fifty to sixty dollars a year, half of which was gained back by subletting the rooms to the Episcopal Society.

While the dues met most of the running expenses of the organization, the cherished plan of establishing a permanent library in Cedar Falls required a much greater expenditure. "Festivities", which would furnish entertainment and thus pleasantly extract money from the community and

at the same time fill the treasury, seemed the most feasible plan. For these "festivities" the Society spared no pains in preparing as elaborate entertainments as the resources of the village permitted. The Fourth of July, Christmas, or Washington's Birthday provided the occasions.

Perhaps the most successful festivity occurred on Independence Day, 1860. Weeks before, the president had appointed a general committee, and lest anything should be overlooked, eleven subsidiary ones. He assigned to one the duty of lighting the hall and exhibition rooms with sufficient candles and kerosene lamps; to another he commissioned the renting or borrowing of a piano and a melodeon. Perhaps to arouse emulation, three separate committees were assigned the duty of displaying in separate booths the flowers, fruits, and vegetables entered. Arrangements were made for serving refreshments. Citizens loaned their choicest paintings and engravings for decorations. A special committee "on cedars" was instructed to bring in from the woods an abundance of boughs for wreaths and for festooning the walls and booths; and to avoid any possible disappointments on the final day, the committee was definitely instructed to bring the cedar to the hall on the morning of July 2nd.

A small fee admitted the townspeople to an

entertainment of Protean nature. Refreshments, however, were "extra". For those interested in seeing the "grandest floral display ever offered in the county," the doors opened at six in the evening. At seven a brass band and patriotic declamations filled in the time until eight when a half hour intermission permitted the people to view the red and blue ribboned petunias, June apples, and radishes, and to congratulate the winners. Afterward the audience of four hundred again filed up the narrow passage way to the Hall where "A Song for the Fourth of July", set to the music of "The Marseilles", was sung. A protracted series of toasts followed, no less than ten, among which were such topics as "the West", "Our Schools", "The Press", "The Bar", and "The Pulpit". Peter Melendy addressed his fellow townsmen on his favorite topic, "Horticulture", and Zimri Streeter on his, "Agriculture".

The audience showed no disposition to hurry away if one may judge from the words of the reporter for the *Gazette*. "A general good time followed," he wrote, "some tarried in the refreshment rooms", a few promenaded, and more visited, but in one room "some of the youthful blood trod the maizy measures of the dance until dewy morn." The "display of flowers", he added, "exceeded anything we have ever seen in the West."

He praised the arrangement and taste displayed, and passed encomiums on the fruit, saying that it could not be equalled west of the Mississippi, and that this was "the opinion of strangers and disinterested parties" who were present. "Taken all in all", he concluded, "the display was highly flattering to the exhibitors, interesting to the spectators and proves the labors of the Society worthwhile." Even so, the strenuous efforts of the various committeemen returned to the Society only a net profit of \$29.50.

On the financial side the Christmas festivity of 1860 proved more successful, for it brought \$185 into the treasury. Fortunately fine weather and excellent sleighing made it possible for 500 people to attend, although it was later conceded that a hundred couples on the dancing floor more than taxed the capacity of the Hall. The admission price was raised to a dollar, but the Society generously permitted the fee to serve several purposes: it paid the annual dues for the ensuing year, admitted "a gentleman and his lady" not only to the festivity, but also to the winter course of lectures, and to all the summer exhibitions of garden products. The program, featuring vocal and instrumental music, a lecture by J. B. Grinnell, a ten o'clock supper, and "a grand hop from 11 P. M. to ? A. M." had been well advertised.

Throughout the autumn the wives and daughters of the members had met weekly to prepare for "a fancy fair" in connection with this Christmas celebration. To display their wares they decorated a pine tree with tallow candles and festooned it with popcorn and cranberries. On this they hung their handiwork — homemade dolls with shoe button eyes and hair of yarn, crocheted tidies, antimacassars, and lambrequins. From the sale of these articles the women turned over to the Society eight dollars to be applied exclusively to the book fund.

In spite of the high prices of commodities and the demands for relief for soldiers and their families, the Society planned an elaborate festival for February 22, 1862, in order to secure books for the library. This time they set the entrance fee at twenty-five cents for adults and ten for children, with refreshments "extra" as usual. For this particular menu oysters formed the *piece de resistance*. Zimri Streeter, an imposing figure, known as Old Black Hawk, officiated as president of the day. The printed program billed a tripartite program, redolent with patriotism. Part one featured the reading of Washington's "Farewell Address"; the singing of "The Red, the White, and the Blue"; a tableau representing Washington, the Goddess of Liberty, and the thirteen original

States; and a patriotic address on "Washington" delivered by Rev. J. S. Denis of Dubuque. For the second part two bands furnished patriotic music and in turn this concert was followed by "two grand aboriginal dances". The final hours were given over to a friendly social period of "feasting and visiting".

Concerning this celebration the candid editor gave a "half and half" report. He criticised the supper as a failure, and deeply regretted that a snow blockade had prevented the orator of the evening from arriving. On the other hand he was jubilant because the treasury of the Society was enriched by \$65 and because the town could shortly have a library — a monument, he editorially proclaimed, "to the intelligence and literary culture of Cedar Falls."

Annually from 1859 to 1865 the Horticultural and Literary Society provided from a half dozen to twenty lectures. Early in October a committee was appointed to invite lecturers to address the townspeople. For the most part the lectures, given by local professional men, were free. When speakers were imported from Waterloo, Waverly, and Independence, a charge of ten cents was made, and for such men as J. S. Denis and J. B. Grinnell the price was advanced to twenty cents.

During the winter of 1861-1862, however, the experiment of offering seventeen lectures for one dollar or ten cents for a single one was tried. So popular was this course that four additional lecturers were secured, two of whom spoke in May. In these formal talks three major themes dominated: the war, horticulture, and mechanical science. For men and women who could scarcely hope to leave the village after the first heavy snowfall, such a course not only furnished an opportunity to see friends and neighbors but supplied information and often proved thought stimulating.

The ministers of the town, M. Porterfield, L. B. Fifield, O. W. Merrill, and John Bowman, contributed generously as did such farmers and business men as Zimri Streeter, G. B. Van Saun, and William McClure. They gave information or opinions on "The Science of Medicine", "Travels in California", "The Age of Machinery", "Public Opinion", "The Promptings of Patriotism", "College Life", "Cromwell", and "Agriculture As It Is and As It Should Be". The feeling that Cedar Falls must possess a lecture course persisted after the Horticultural and Literary Society had become the Library Association; and later in better times such noted personages as Bayard Taylor, Clara Barton, and Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke to Cedar Falls audiences in Overman Hall.

The founders sought to bring a form of adult education into the circumscribed and often monotonously arduous life of Iowa pioneers. "We believe that horticulture ranks next to the church and the school," said Peter Melendy in *FIELD AND GARDEN*. Beyond all other projects, however, one dominated all the rest — the desire to establish a library. The fifth officer to be added was a librarian, and no part of the Society's procedure is so particularly minuted as the search for and the acquiring of books, the rules and regulations for use of the books, and the obtaining of more and more money to buy more and more books. All the charter members and many who joined later had come into the Cedar Valley in movers' wagons, drawn by horses or ox teams. With most of them, books had not been considered practical necessities, and had, often with reluctance on the part of the owners, been crowded out of the closely packed prairie schooners. Under such circumstances the greatest single achievement of the group was the gathering of a library of five hundred books and of constantly increasing that number during the war years.

Five months after the founding of the Society, an indefatigable committee deposited at headquarters fifty books as a nucleus; a month later it supplied a second fifty volumes. Four other mem-

bers set out on a book-soliciting campaign with the result that Dr. A. H. Meredith brought in thirty-nine, Dr. S. N. Pierce, thirty, G. M. Henry, eighteen, and Peter Melendy showed his good will and energy by furnishing one hundred eighteen. In less than a year the Society had acquired over three hundred volumes. Two books, deemed necessary, were lacking; consequently A. L. Mitts was appointed a committee of one to solicit funds for a Bible and for Webster's *Pictorial Dictionary*.

Rather curiously, however, at the very meeting when A. L. Mitts was asked to secure the necessary amount, the secretary was ordered to draw immediately on the treasury to pay in full the Society's subscription to *The Scientific American* and to *The Horticulturist*. The secretary reported that the Hon. Timothy Davis had acceded to the Society's request and had officially ordered the *Annals of Congress* to be sent to the Society. A half year later a different committee reported that a suitable bookcase for their library would cost \$22.50 and an additional sum of two and a half dollars was needed for a curtain. For both of these needs the first "festivity" of 1860, celebrating Washington's Birthday, procured the amount desired.

So eager was the organization to acquire books that for at least two years it offered to remit an-

nual dues if a member, new or old, would contribute a suitable volume or volumes. Emphasis was placed, however, on the word suitable, and Dempsey Overman was appointed a committee of one to weigh the books in the balance and report to the Society. In most cases members and their volumes were acceptable and accepted, but in a few cases Dempsey Overman was directed in no uncertain terms to return the books to the owner.

Members were urged to hand to the acting librarian their choices for new books, but these lists passed through a sifting committee, which made the final decisions. In 1861, at an average cost of a little less than a dollar a volume, a hundred and five books were purchased and seventy-seven in 1862. As an event of importance the *Gazette* chronicled the entire list; furthermore, the choices as printed, indicate that lovers of good literature had influence with the purchasing committee. In their day a number of the books were best selling American and British classics. Among the arrivals listed in 1861 appear Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, Livingstone's *Travels in Africa*, Lowell's *Bigelow Papers*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and *Typee*, and Tennyson's *Princess*.

Although most of the regulations for the Society's library are still common in library disci-

pline, a few seem curious to-day. On two occasions in the year, the week preceding the Fourth, and the two weeks before New Year's Day, all books were to be returned to the bookcase for inventory and none could be withdrawn during those days. In the Library there was to be no loud talking, no smoking, no spitting upon the floor, and no whittling. The committee had never heard of a Dewey Decimal System, but the following definite arrangement of books in alphabetical order was insisted upon: Religion, History, Poetry, Agriculture, Horticulture, and Fiction. Leeway was allowed for the unclassifiable volumes by labelling the seventh division, Miscellaneous.

The war, Soldiers' Relief Societies, the multiplying of social units such as the New England Association, and the denominational activities of eight churches tended to reduce the dominance of the Horticultural Society in Cedar Falls. During 1864 interest lessened decidedly, and its most devoted members began to see that if the best interests of the community were to be forwarded everything else should be sacrificed to that of making the library increasingly accessible to the public.

On January 13, 1865, the Horticultural Society was formally disbanded and its place was taken

by the Library Association, which continued to function until the public library, now the Dayton-Carnegie, became a tax-supported institution. More than twenty public-spirited men each subscribed five dollars and on January 20, 1865, an order was sent to Chicago for a hundred dollars worth "of the best and choicest books" available. Dr. S. N. Pierce cheerfully accepted the responsibility of librarian, even allowing the books to be kept in and issued from his office. A daughter of Zimri Streeter, Mrs. Curlis Ford, one of Cedar Falls' few nonagenarians, remembers this library and how she used to stop at Dr. Pierce's office to tell him that she could not be limited to one book but must have two a week for her own reading.

Just what Cedar Falls owes to the men who established the Cedar Valley Horticultural and Literary Society can never be fully ascertained. The Society and its successor, the Library Association, by continuing the lectures and lyceums, prepared the way for the Cedar Falls Parlor Reading Circle which is now completing its first sixty years of life. Perhaps the eight avenues of elms in the older section of town, the name of The Lawn City of Iowa, and the present activity of the Garden Club owe something to Peter Melendy, and to others who experimented in the raising of flowers and of fruit trees in the fifties and the sixties.

This view certainly is held by Solomon Humbert, who recalls the energy, the spirit of scientific inquiry to which Peter Melendy and the Cedar Valley Horticultural and Literary Society gave expression when it attempted to interest pioneering families in the cultivation of the soil and the mind.

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