

The College of the Pioneer

Being a pioneer in fact, a scholar at heart, and a poet by nature, Thomas H. Macbride was able to interpret the character and significance of early Iowa colleges from careful observation and with inimitable charm. These pages have been selected from his second series of addresses, On the Campus. — The Editor.

On all the prairies of Iowa in the early fifties there was not a railway, hardly a common road. Vast portions of the country were unoccupied, trackless, save as wandering herds of cattle made trails from hilltop to hilltop and from meadow to meadow. In the summer there stretched away a land of flowers, the tillage of millenia, beautiful beyond all compare, everywhere wild gardens watered by lazy unbridled creeks and plethoric rivers. Fleece-like mists marked out the vast, undrained, miry swamps and marshes. The mists followed the sluggish drainage in long, winding clouds, sometimes by sun undried, by winds unlifted, for days and weeks together. In winter, a blizzard-swept field of ice and snow made all the plains impassable.

Along the Mississippi River half a dozen towns were set, here and there, to welcome the incoming

tide of immigration; but the multitude of the people was scattered in the village-like settlements, far and wide. Cabins were the usual homes of men, — plain log cabins standing by the banks of the larger streams and rivers, more sparsely dotting the hilltops of the prairies in the ever-widening fringe of progressive occupation toward the west. Public buildings were small and cheaply built, courthouses and churches insignificant. The everywhere present log schoolhouse served in many communities for school and temple. Money was none; wealth was none; personal property none, save such as came in an ox-drawn cart or wagon from some eastern home, or such as might be estimated in the value of tools and cattle.

Yet these people built colleges! How might Carnegie or Rockefeller have smiled at such a place for such investment, even on the familiar basis of "we'll give one if you'll give two"; and yet here also, doubtless for purposes we dream not of, God had spread one of the seedfields of time! These men built colleges, built them in numbers, one at least in every county, structures of brick or stone, standing in many cases to this day. How did it happen? How did they do it? Who were these people, what impelled them to such a labor, and what did they mean? They are all quiet now; possibly here or there an aged man

survives, with memory dim, dreaming of earlier years; how shall I picture for you the people of his day?

Well, in the first place, the pioneers of Iowa were optimists, they were happy people. They lived much out of doors; they were mostly young and full of lusty life. They knew what they were doing. They knew the goodness of the land, upon its fertility they relied, its beauty they enjoyed. In spring wild orchards filled the landscape with glorious bloom; in autumn a wealth of ripening fruit awaited the user. The mother cared for the simple duties of the house; the father tilled a limited field; the children tumbled amid the wild flowers of the meadow. In winter, severe enough betimes, roaring wood-fires in the throat of a widened chimney filled the cabin with warmth and cheer. Men and women alike were brave.

In the second place, these people were of more than ordinary intelligence. Yale and Princeton and Jefferson were named among them, and even Harvard was not unknown. In those spirited times they well knew all that was going on, and during the long winter evenings, in schoolhouse and cabin, the historian Rhodes might have heard men discuss the repeal of the Missouri Compromise with an acumen which would have brought lustre to the pages of his Volume I, brilliant as

those pages are. These men loved learning; all did not possess it, but thousands had in some way felt the sweetness of its power. They knew the meaning of a college, and they loved it.

In the third place, the pioneers of Iowa were thoroughly religious men. They believed in God and his providence in the world. All over these prairies the Sabbath was filled with song. Men sang in their homes.

On Sunday grove or schoolhouse was the meeting place, and in fine weather people journeyed for miles to church. The songs of Zion filled the aisles and stirred the leafy ceilings in the temples of God's planting, temples not made with hands. In autumn, when the hillsides were red with sumac and the maples in the valleys were gold, what more appropriate than to sing:

There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign.

And so on the way they sang; so that it is literally true that the prairies were sometimes filled with the music of religious song. One who knew these people well was wont to say that ninety per cent of the early population of Iowa were members of our various democratic churches.

Better than all, in all these forming counties, the unwearied circuit-rider, of whatever faith, rode his familiar round; by every track, by every trail

he passed, bearing his message of courage and good cheer. You may see him yonder on his pony, outlined on the hilltop against the evening sky, as low descends the summer sun. From that hilltop the view is glorious, but does not include the prospect of a hotel; and, saddlebags for pillows, the traveller will spend the night alone, beneath the stars!

As days shorten and grow colder, the pony finds tether near some lonely cabin; its owner made welcome within. The neighbors gather. "They round the ingle form a circle wide," and in the fire-log's ruddy light they talk the evening hours away. They talk of the republic and its dangers, of the new commonwealth and its possibilities, of their children and their hopes; and the fire-log falls to embers gray.

But as they talked they became men of vision. They saw the children of the prairie coming to manhood and womanhood without the sweetness they themselves had known. The eastern schools were far away; there was but one solution: colleges must be; Christian culture must be; and so these men built the colleges and secured the culture that they sought.

How did they build their colleges? They builded them themselves. How did they build their colleges? They had no money; but they had

zeal and faith and vision. They gave their labor and their time. All winter long you might hear the axes ringing in the forest, the sledges plying in the quarries. You might see on the horizon smoke ascending from the furnace, as plain men, with purpose high, hewed the beams and quarried the stone and burned the brick and lime to build the college. Had not God given them health and hands? And so they laid the foundation, and the corner stone, and at length they brought forth the "headstone with shoutings, crying: Grace, grace unto it!"

Even so the men of Iowa builded for themselves Wesleyan, and Penn, and Cornell, and Upper Iowa, and Lenox, and Pella, and Tabor, and all the colleges and academies between, over the whole face of the land. For these buildings, thus erected, they found teachers, consecrated men and women, who also gave what they had; nay, they gave more than the others' all! These gave their lives; they gave themselves, that the youth of Iowa might learn the more enduring joys of human life.

And so young men and maidens went to college and learned of the things of the spirit. The hillsides still blossomed as before, but for young men and women there opened far vistas of the fair fields of literature and history, with flowers and

harvest and the shadows of passing clouds. The birds still sang in the budding thickets, but at college young people learned the music of immortal song, cheering, consoling the troubled hearts of men from century to century. The mists still hung in the valleys, but young people learned to look upon them without fear, — symbols of those other clouds that everywhere gird us round, dimming the vision of our keenest insight, but yielding to the progress of knowledge as mists melt before the sun. The intellectual life opened, and Iowa was transformed!

But this is not all; these colleges set in motion those forces which insured the success of the public schools; nay, the State University itself is but the culminating crest of that impulse for learning started by the people who in their poverty would have colleges, eighty and ninety years ago.

It is sometimes said that education is to fit men for life. Our fathers thought farther; they said education is to fit men to live well. They emphasized duty, and built their colleges with these things in view. There are those who say that the smaller colleges have had their day, and that there are in Iowa too many colleges, that they can not support themselves, and all that sort of thing. I am not of those who believe any of these things; certainly not if the colleges go forward to do the

office for which they are set, and which they have thus far done so well. Every one of them is needed. Every one of them is a center of inspiration in its own community, an outpost of light which must not be dimmed and against which the powers of dust and darkness should not be permitted to prevail. But let them not attempt more than they can do. Phillips-Exeter has never be-thought itself to become a university, nor even a college; Phillips-Exeter is Phillips-Exeter throughout the world.

Education shall teach men to live, to live the best lives that humanity knows. All our wealth and material progress are good, but only as they make all better things more widely possible, by no means as for a moment obscuring these. The success of a college, as of a nation, is measured by what it contributes to the intellectual life and joy of men, to their moral and spiritual force and power, to the consolation and comfort of men. There is no other success. Our fathers knew this, and colleges and schools exist that the nation may live.

The men of the prairie built their colleges as their fathers beyond the mountains had built theirs, albeit on more liberal lines. The schools of New England, the log college of New Jersey, those institutions named of Hamilton and Jeffer-

son, were all for men. The college of the prairie was for men *and women*. Invention born of need, whether for ultimate weal or woe, we know not; the future may determine that. This much we know: the thing was done; the college was built, and used, as we have seen. By way of the college of the pioneer, coeducation came, and came as if to stay.

But however in future this may be, in the college itself the student of the time was not the only gainer. As in all such cases, where the spirit prompts, the founders builded better than they knew. As the quality of mercy, their action twice was blest; in serving their children, themselves and us they served, in that they gave formal and enduring expression to their own ideals, their own judgments, their own sentiments. We know now with absolute clearness what these men thought about certain definite things, which, whether we will or not, are become to-day far less certain; likely to constitute hereafter but a minor part in our more comprehensive schemes of public education.

Be it recalled that our beginnings, though substantial, were not extensive. Be it not forgotten, a single structure, of stone or brick, did for the time suffice. A roof indeed, essential then as now; but no more then than now was this the college.

These were Garfield's times, when, on fair days, at least, a single log sufficed, one end the Hopkins throne!

In those strenuous days, strange as it may appear, neither faculty nor students were organized for dancing, nor for social functions chiefly; the students were organized for debate, and the literary society or lyceum vied with the most popular class-room, while members of the faculty themselves lent every form of assistance and encouragement.

Great modern libraries we had none; each professor had books a few; and, as they might, our societies bought new books as these appeared. But when neither the books of the professor nor any private source could yield the information needed, the professors somehow knew! The mind of the pioneer professor was simply saturated with the history of his country.

The student at the pioneer college studied history; not for credit, for *debate!* For him Macaulay pictured the folly of the Stuarts and Motley the heroism of William the Silent; for him Burke declaimed against the stupid infatuation of English kings, and De Tocqueville eulogized American democracy. For him Story analyzed that wonderful constitution which Washington and the fathers had framed, Hamilton defended, and

the genius of Marshall made plain. These helped him to understand the cost and worth of freedom and the hopeless misery of the slave. The past brought illustration and form; the utterance of the day gave impulse and enthusiasm, the very bread of intellectual life.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding all such activity, notwithstanding even the din and turmoil of battle, in the pioneer college the spell of pure literature, its value as such, its surpassing loveliness, was never quite forgot. No; of great libraries we had none; but for all that, we did find literature, found it each for himself; for had not each prairie college its own little collection of books, often of the most interesting sort? Generally the books were a gift, a present from some patient, professional man, some minister or lawyer who at the end of life's day presented to his favorite college the accumulation of busy years; perhaps also *his* inheritance, the books the chosen tomes of those his predecessors who knew and loved!

We missed the great library and so missed much; but were there not possibly compensations? Never was student confused by ten thousand volumes flashed suddenly to vision; never confronted by an officious clerk whose meager attainments sometimes seem to mask pretensions to general omniscience, before which president and professor

alike must flee. But the few hundred volumes in the library of the college, where on a Saturday some kindly instructor, perhaps the president himself, awaited the expectant student, — what wondrous books were there! What beautiful old binding some possessed, damaged perchance by use, or transit, but once how fair, tooled and finished! What odor of the years was theirs, symbolical of memories; the faded bookmark smooth, its pristine brilliance dimmed, pressed in yellow leaves with printing sharp from type unworn.

Applied science by that particular name we did not have; never heard of such a thing. The wonderful flora of a new continent, for instance, we were just beginning to understand a little, through the earlier magnificently serviceable publications of Asa Gray; but the idea that plants might in ways unnoted and obscure seriously interfere with one another, and so hinder those we strove to cultivate, that was as yet concealed, in large measure, from the wisest. The microscope was a toy. Our wheat went down, as it had done in all the world for centuries, in the whiteness of blight; or strange accusing lines of black or red upon the ripened straw and stubble proclaimed the rust, but none of us ever thought of studying these things with a view to their suppression. Our nearest approach to more recent regular procedure came when our

botany and insect men suggested ploughing an adjoining strip of land to prevent chinch-bugs, then a universal pest, from passing from dying wheat to standing maize, and recommended that such wheat be burned rather than gathered by the cradle.

So with physical science. Cultivated largely as a matter of intellectual interest, "*illustrated*" by such experiments as might not involve too much expense, chemistry and physics, under the head of natural philosophy, were presented for cultural purpose only, to proclaim the triumphs of the human spirit which had availed to make discoveries so curious, and the marvellous wisdom of God which had thus established such intricate and beautiful relationships in the whole circle of things otherwise inanimate and dull. Of electricity we heard; the telegraph the latest, and, we thought, the *final* application of that wondrous form of energy. Of electricity we heard; we knew the word derived from Greek, meant *amber*; amber we did not know! So much we knew and dared no more; nor did we dream the time might one day come when, by very familiarity, the surely "incensed" power should find humiliation in the vulgar title "*juice!*"

We studied human physiology. Here was science indeed, and science so far applied, for we

heard lectures on *hygiene*. But our professor of physiology was not himself a scientific man. He talked of the *rules* of hygiene as formulae to be followed, like to the rules of versification or juridical procedure. He was a psychologist, perhaps, albeit in those less ambitious days he did not know it, and remains accordingly unknown to fame. His subject was unpopular, taken in spring at the time sassafras-tea was commonly served in college boarding-houses, and perhaps for similar reasons; but he was a conscientious man and had ideas.

As for the fathers, so for us, the old-time classics formed the basis sure of daily food. But: we studied, not for Latin, some purist may grieve to hear, but for the English into which it must perforce be rendered. Of the author's elegant accomplishment, as creator of fine letters, — of this the pioneer professor said but little.

But he did something better still; he introduced us to history, to political economy, to civil life. Whether democracy, republic, or empire, we followed its fortunes. We knew why Athens triumphed and why she failed; knew it not for Athens but for ourselves. With Cato and Scipio and Coriolanus we became personally acquaint, as with Marius and Cicero and Caesar; we knew *why* the "fierce Carthaginian almost won," and

why the patriot Brutus failed. But these were illustrations only: we learned vastly more.

Finally, and essentially, beyond all the arts, liberal or other, beyond all the classics, histories, and philosophies, the pioneer college was a religious college; in its curriculum, whether by text or lecture, religion of a personal sort had everywhere the place of honor.

This was a matter of course. At that date in our history, only the various religious denominations had organization adequate to initiate, and carry forward at all, such an enterprise, even had other people been so disposed. Besides, as a matter of fact, education is a recognized prerogative of the Christian church. Its founder was a teacher, and he bade his followers teach. And so in the prairie college we thoroughly studied the Scriptures, learned their marvellous English, delighting in that, and were moved by the wondrous spirit that, after thirty centuries, so lives and glows above the ancient pages. All the while our fond professors, in season and out of season, sought to inculcate not the tenets of their own particular form of faith, but the beauty of faith itself; and so, in the height of their great argument, continued to

assert eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

THOMAS H. MACBRIDE