

THE PALIMPSEST

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Pioneer Learning

When the Northwest Territory was established in 1787, thoughtful leaders, realizing that religion, morality, and knowledge are necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, declared that schools and the means of education should forever be encouraged. Later, when the pioneers crossed the plains in their trek westward, they were seeking adventure, homes, comforts, and riches. But more, they were also seeking a land of freedom and learning — a land where their children might have better advantages than they, and where their children's children might run and play with the freedom of a running brook, and grow in stature and in knowledge. Confronted with the stern realities of life, they nevertheless had visions of a new and better day. The way, they believed, lay through the valley of hard work and over the hill of learning.

Young Berryman Jennings was the first school teacher in all the vast region north of Missouri

and west of the Mississippi River. Jennings was a Kentuckian by birth and a frontiersman by choice. Born in the blue grass region in 1807, he had moved to the prairies of Illinois and at the age of twenty had established his residence at the little town of Commerce, which later came to be Nauvoo. Commerce was at that time an outpost of the advancing civilization. In 1829, however, Dr. Isaac Galland, a physician and a "man of many activities and enterprizes", pushed the frontier further westward, crossed the Mississippi with his family and made settlement at Ahwipetuck, the present site of Galland. As other settlers arrived, interest in education developed, and in 1830 Dr. Galland recrossed the river and hired young Jennings to teach the first school in Iowa-land. As compensation for his services the school master received his board and lodging at the Galland home, and the use of the doctor's rather limited medical library.

It is a fair assumption that Berryman Jennings "must have been a sprightly lad, and educated beyond his fellows", else Dr. Galland, who had studied literature and art as well as medicine, would not have selected him to instruct the youth of the newly established settlement. But perhaps more pertinent is the comment of James W. Campbell, one of the pupils of that first school, who

many years later said of his teacher: "I remember him well, for when kind and oft-repeated words failed to impress upon the memory of Washington Galland and myself the difference between A and B, he had neither delicacy nor hesitancy about applying the rod, which usually brightened our intellects."

The first schoolhouse in Iowa was a little log building ten feet by twelve feet in dimensions — a typical pioneer cabin — located on the bank of the Mississippi. After the building had been used for a time for educational purposes it was converted into a little kitchen for a pioneer family. Still later it served for a time as a shelter for livestock. Eventually it fell into decay and was used for firewood. Even the site on which that little structure stood has now disappeared, having been submerged by the Father of Waters when the great Keokuk dam was built. Only a native boulder and a bronze tablet at a point nearby mark the approximate site of the building. Plans are now being considered to construct a replica of that historic building, to the end that the youth of Iowa may better visualize educational beginnings in their Commonwealth. Meanwhile other school buildings have been erected — thousands of them — more stately than the first. In the expansion of these material structures we see the evolution of

things cultural — a growth and development which characterize the educational advancement of a century.

Schools in Iowa were first established as private ventures, sponsored by those who were interested in providing educational advantages for their own children. When the first schools were opened there were no school laws — indeed, no laws of any kind — applicable to the Iowa country. In 1834 the region west of the Mississippi was attached to the Territory of Michigan. Thenceforth the school laws of Michigan were applicable. Moreover, the legislation of the Territory of Michigan may be traced to the influence of New England. At a later date, after Iowa had become a separate Territory, Iowa laws were adopted in a similar manner from the Michigan statutes. This sometimes led to obvious incongruities. Thus the law of 1840 made reference to a “superintendent of public instruction” to whom the clerk of the district court in each county should report annually. But in reality there was at that time no office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in Iowa, and so it was quite impossible to carry this provision into effect. It was not until 1841 that this office was established. Even then it appears to have been created more to conform with the law of the previous year than because of

any existing need. The work was of a clerical nature. No mention was made of control over instruction, and the office was discontinued the next year.

If we move forward a decade in the history of the Commonwealth, we will note that better school laws were being enacted and that pioneer learning and the means of education were moving steadily westward. In October, 1851, the electors of school district number three of Iowa City Township in Johnson County "met and elected" officers. About a year later an election was held to authorize a tax for the erection of a building "of such size and dimensions" as the building committee might think proper. The new building was ready for occupancy by June 1, 1853.

The compensation of teachers in those early days is worthy of note. District number three of Iowa City paid teachers twenty-four dollars during the year 1849; in 1850 thirty-seven dollars; in 1851 thirty dollars; and at the close of the year 1852 the secretary declared that he had advanced six and a half dollars to meet a deficit. In October, 1855, twenty dollars of the funds available were retained for a "summer school", while for the winter term it was requested that each scholar furnish one-half cord of wood "already cut for the stove". In 1857 one-half the expense of maintain-

ing the school was assessed to the pupils attending.

In his *History of Education in Iowa*, Clarence Ray Aurner reminds us that for more than a decade after the close of the Territorial period "there were teachers in all communities acting on their own account and collecting a fee from each child taught". In some communities they were paid in part from the proceeds of a "rate bill" — receiving at the same time some remuneration from "boarding around". During this period property did not support the public schools and provide for the education of all children under laws that systematized the work of district organization, supervision, and maintenance. On the contrary the teachers of those early days "made their own systems, recommended their own kind of text-books, manufactured their own apparatus, and collected their own bills."

The text-books used in the early Iowa schools were little more than a heterogeneous collection acquired from a variety of sources. Indeed, almost any book was acceptable for school purposes, since the supply was exceedingly limited. In many communities the books used were those which had been purchased for the schools in other States, for on emigrating to Iowa the pioneer family usually included text-books as a part of the well-selected baggage. In keeping with the spirit

of the pioneer, when the district school was opened the books of the neighborhood were collected and used without much regard to uniformity, adaptability, or content. McGuffey's readers were perhaps the most common of texts, while the arithmetic might be Ray's or perchance Colburn and Perkins's. The grammar, if indeed a grammar were used, might be Wells's or Greene's or Bullion's or Pinneo's — little matter so long as it was a grammar.

The course of study in the pioneer school was limited in scope, the three R's — "reading", "riting", and "rithmetic" — being the basic subjects. One should not forget spelling, however, for now and again the old spelling school came to be the center of interest. The contest might be one between the Oak Grove school and the Sun Prairie district as described by Hamlin Garland in *Boy Life on the Prairie*.

The crowd having assembled, Jim and Henry, each representing one of the opposing schools, "stepped out into the middle of the room and received the broom from the master". By gripping the broom alternately, one hand above the other, it was soon determined that Jim should have first choice, "and laughing, crowding, whispering and grimacing, the two schools ranged along opposite walls of the room". There were twenty on either

side and the few remaining in their seats quivered with excitement. The teacher of Sun Prairie took up the spelling book to pronounce the words and the contest was on. One by one the poor spellers were soon eliminated. "Jim and Henry both went down early in the strife". Lincoln and Milton, two Sun Prairie boys, who had frequently been opponents in wrestling matches, now stood side by side to win laurels for their school. "I can't wrestle for shucks", said Lincoln, "but I can spell with any of you." As each word was pronounced, Lincoln could visualize it on the printed page, and he spelled on and on as if he knew no defeat. Gradually Jim's battle line faded away until only Ella Pierce, a slim, homely little girl, remained. Then the Oak Grove teacher took the book confident that his favorite pupil would yet win the contest.

For a time Lincoln and Milton were pitted against little Ella Pierce. To a disinterested observer it might have appeared a bit unfair. But Ella remained undaunted. The hands of the clock moved on. The hour for closing was long past. The sun was lowering in the west. But interest in the contest continued. At length Milton went down on "Cygnet, a young swan", and Lincoln stood alone. Suddenly the teacher took up the dictionary and began to pronounce new and strange words. Lincoln stammered, hesitated, and

went down, but Ella failed on the same word. Technically Oak Grove had won the contest. "School is dismissed" the teacher said, and pandemonium reigned as the two schools were simultaneously released from what had proved to be a well-matched, old-fashioned spelling contest.

And what shall we say of the growth and development of the youth who attended these early Iowa schools — those boys and girls for whom sacrifices were made and who received the benefits of pioneer learning? Many of them were to go farther westward, pioneering all their lives, opening new lands, creating new counties, and helping to establish new States. Many others were to remain in Iowa, to become farmers and housewives, doctors and lawyers and ministers — men and women who should control the affairs of state and pass on to posterity the wholesome influences of noble living. It was a goodly patrimony which these youthful pioneers wrought for the boys and girls of succeeding generations. Iowa youth of to-day are deeply indebted to the youth of other years for the educational advantages, which have become a great superstructure well constructed upon the sure foundations of pioneer learning.

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