

The Academy

Long ago the ancient Greeks had a beautiful garden outside the city of Athens. In the garden was a grove and a gymnasium. It was in the midst of this picturesque setting that the philosopher, Plato, met and taught his followers. As the garden had been named in honor of Academus, this meeting place came to be known as the Academy. From Greece the name advanced to western Europe, to England, and thence to America.

In Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, and the New England States the academy flourished at an early date. As the pioneer and the covered wagon moved westward, so the academy advanced to meet the educational needs of the early settlers. Across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois it came. In Iowa, as in the eastern States, it contributed liberally to culture and learning. With the passage of years it grew and expanded, yielded its fruitage, and finally gave way to the more democratic institution — the public high school. Such, in brief, is the story of the rise and decline of the private academy.

Early education in the eastern States centered around the Latin school, with its selective, classical

subjects — chiefly Latin and Greek — the only purpose of which was to prepare the student for college, where he might pursue studies for the ministry or for leadership in the State. But the pioneer on the frontier needed more practical knowledge. To meet this need the academy — a private or semi-public institution with a practical outlook — was founded.

In such a school the curriculum might include the study of surveying, bookkeeping, modern language, and natural science. Other courses of study, including a classical course, might be offered. For the most part, however, emphasis was placed upon those subjects which were designed to qualify the students to engage in the practical and commonplace duties and activities of life. College entrance requirements were also kept in mind in formulating the course of study.

Enthusiasm for the establishment of academies sometimes overran the demand. In early Iowa many institutions of learning were planned on paper. Some were granted charters by the legislature, but the building program never materialized — paper academies they may well be called. Thus, while Iowa was still a part of the Territory of Wisconsin, an "omnibus statute" provided for the establishment of ten seminaries or academies, seven of which were to be located in what is now

Iowa. Of these seven institutions, however, only one — that established at West Point in Lee County — was ever put into operation. Paper academies were more numerous than those of brick and stone.

An unusually interesting educational experiment developed in connection with the Davenport Manual Labor College which was founded by law in the late thirties and placed under the direction of twenty-two trustees, of whom Antoine Le Claire and George Davenport were the most prominent. This college may have had literary and scientific aims, but its chief purpose was to "qualify young men to engage in the several employments and professions of society, and to discharge honorably and usefully the various duties of life." Provision was made for the purchase of equipment and for the installation of a system of manual labor "in order that the expenses of students might be lessened and at the same time their health promoted". As a safeguard against over capitalization the law provided that the real estate holdings of the school should not at any time exceed six hundred and forty acres of land. This precaution was unnecessary, however, for time proved that, despite the "high sounding title", the wide range of subjects, and the legal provisions, the Davenport Manual Labor College failed to function for

two very practical reasons — lack of students and lack of funds with which to operate.

Despite the failure of many academies, there were others which had a long and continuous record of valuable service. Among these none stands out more prominently than Denmark Academy, the history of which covers a period of nearly seventy years. Incorporated by the Territorial legislature in 1843, its aim from the beginning was to instruct the youth of both sexes "in science and literature." The academy was organized as a stock company, and unlike many of the schools of that day it had a permanent endowment in the form of one-half of all the lots in the town of Denmark — this gift having been made by the proprietors of the town site.

For some years after its incorporation Denmark Academy made little progress and was not widely known. Indeed, it operated chiefly as "a select school for the village." The low, one-story building in which it was housed served not only for academic work, but for church services and public assemblies as well. There it was that the first Congregational church in Iowa was founded. There, too, Asa Turner, a leading pioneer minister, preached for many years, and there the famous Iowa Band was ordained in 1843. Five years after this date a new stone building was erected —

"a neat two story structure, twenty-eight by forty seven feet", which was used by the Academy for many years.

The school was opened in 1845. Seven years later it had but eighteen students, only one of whom resided outside the community of Denmark. During the year 1852, under the leadership of Rev. Henry K. Edson, there was a phenomenal growth — the yearly attendance rapidly mounting to ninety. From that time forth Denmark Academy was a potent factor in the educational program of southeastern Iowa. The institution was described as being located in "a quiet, healthy place, and secure from the temptations incident to our large towns". In a community possessed of "an intelligent society and high moral tone," it was "just the kind of a school to which parents would wish to send their children."

The classical department was designed, so it was declared, to equip the student with a thorough knowledge of the principles of the languages and to create an interest in classical authors; and it was asserted that with two or three years instruction at the Academy a student would be prepared to enter any of the colleges in the country. Furthermore, a "superior set of Philosophical Apparatus" was owned by the Academy so that instruction in the natural sciences might be demonstrated by illus-

trations and experiments. It appears, too, that special training was offered to those desiring to become teachers, inasmuch as there were available instructors who were said to have had "much experience in this difficult art."

Although the Academy was not a boarding school, parents were assured that "those in charge would maintain a watchful care over all persons under their instruction," and if desired the principal would assume special supervision of students. The daily recitations were to include instruction in morals and correct habits of life, while lessons from the Bible were given as a weekly exercise. Finally, all students were expected to attend service on the Sabbath, and by the rules of the institution they were forbidden to indulge in "profanity, card-playing, or dancing."

In 1865 the Academy reached its highest point in attendance, when two hundred and seventy students from fifteen States and Territories were registered. The Academy building was then found to be "too straight for the numbers that sought admission", and two years later a more commodious building was erected at a cost of \$17,000. Of this sum \$11,000 was contributed by the citizens of the town of Denmark.

For fifty years Denmark Academy contributed liberally to the educational development of Iowa,

and many of its alumni were prominent in educational and civic affairs throughout the State. With the establishment of the public high schools, however, attendance at the Academy gradually diminished, and the school again came to be, for the most part, a local institution. At last, when a new high school building was erected in 1912, the name Denmark Academy High School was adopted and the Academy as such passed into history.

Other academies there were, in Iowa, very similar in character and influence to Denmark Academy. Among these were Howe's Academy at Mount Pleasant; Mechanics' Academy, McClain's Academy, and Willis's Academy of Iowa City; Cedar Valley Seminary at Osage, the Prairie Home Seminary at Waterloo, and many others.

The teachers of those early days were able, aggressive, and versatile. A student in one of the early Iowa academies in referring to his "professor" in later years said: "He kept everyone wide awake all the time. His long suit was fish, not to eat but to use as bait for arithmetic. He was liable to stop morning devotions to ask how much a fish would weigh whose tail was twice as long as its body. And when he was not working fish, he rolled in butter balls on us. How much would a six inch butter ball weigh, if a three inch ball weighed so much?"

Frequently the compensation of the teacher was dependent upon the number of pupils enrolled. Accordingly, efforts were made not only to obtain new pupils but to encourage and interest those already enrolled. Nor was this entirely a selfish motive for an advancement of personal culture and a development of the school meant a lifting of the entire community to a higher level.

Schools organized especially for girls were not uncommon in Iowa in the decades of the fifties and sixties. These were sometimes called academies, but, perhaps more frequently, institutes or seminaries. In 1853 Catherine Beecher, a sister of Henry Ward Beecher and of Harriet Beecher Stowe, visited Dubuque for the purpose of establishing an institution for the education of women. Out of this movement Dubuque Female Seminary developed. Miss Beecher visited the city again in 1855 and pledged \$20,000 toward an endowment fund, subject to certain conditions. The conditions were not carried out, however, and the gift was not received.

The most elaborate plan for feminine education in Iowa in those early days was to be found at the Female Eclectic Institute at Davenport, which advertised as essentially *sui generis* — the only one of its kind — and which was in fact without model elsewhere. The aim was to include in the curricu-

lum "everything that rightfully belonged to education". Two distinct aims, however, were emphasized — "the preparation for independent support" and "training for domestic life". This was a new adventure in western culture. There was no precedent for such courses, and it was necessary for the Institute "to make provisions for instruction theretofore unavailable". Particular attention was called to the practice in English composition, since it was recognized that woman was "to a great extent shut out from the rostrum and confined to the parlor or school room." To make herself heard beyond these limits it was necessary for her to be well trained in the use of the pen: by no other means could she make an impression upon the public or transmit her ideas to future generations.

Detailed specifications of what was required of students was sometimes set forth in catalogs. Mount Pleasant Female Seminary, established in 1863, required that each student have "an English dictionary, an atlas, and a Bible", as well as an umbrella, a pair of thick-soled shoes and part of the furnishings of a room, "including a carpet if desired". Parents were requested not to furnish expensive articles of jewelry and dress, and it was particularly pointed out that "*Confectionaries and such eatables are contraband as detrimental to health*" for they "breed discontent and sickness

among the Pupils and bring increased care, anxiety and labor for the Teachers." Moreover, young women were not to be entrusted with money for the purchase of books, it being advised that funds for that purpose be deposited with the principal.

The conduct of students was also closely guarded. No visiting was allowed on Sunday. Gentlemen, except fathers and brothers, were in no instance permitted to call without special permission. All students living out of town were expected to board at the institution, so that they might "enjoy the constant care, example and society of their Teachers." All students were required to attend Bible classes and church services at some place designated by the parents or at a particular church with the principal.

As early as 1856, D. Franklin Wells pointed out the educational and economic advantages of publicly controlled schools. He was looking forward, he said, to the time when the people generally would perceive that public schools should be encouraged and supported until they become "good enough for the richest and cheap enough for the poorest". In this regard Professor Wells was a prophet. It was several years before his dream came true, but in the end the public high school developed, and the doors of the historic private academy were forever closed.

J. A. SWISHER