THE PALIMPSEST

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Cultural Aspirations

"With very few exceptions," declared Lieutenant Albert Miller Lea who had talked with hundreds of squatters in his travels through the Black Hawk Purchase, "there is not a more orderly, industrious, active, pains-taking population west of the Alleghenies, than is this of the Iowa District. Those who have been accustomed to associate the name of *Squatter* with the idea of idleness and recklessness, would be quite surprised to see the systematic manner in which every thing is here conducted. For intelligence, I boldly assert that they are not surpassed, as a body, by an equal number of citizens of any country in the world." Nor was Lea alone in his opinion of the Iowa pioneers. Senator Thomas Hart Benton asserted "there was not a better population on the face of the earth."

The framers of the Ordinance of 1787 laid the groundwork of Iowa culture when they wrote: "Religion, morality and knowledge, being neces-

sary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." To implement the spirit of this declaration, Congress reserved one section of land in each township for the purpose of maintaining schools. With commendable foresight Governor Robert Lucas in his first message to the Iowa legislature declared: "There is no subject to which I wish to call your attention more emphatically, than the subject of establishing, at the commencement of our political existence, a well digested system of common schools".

The editor of the *Iowa News* was equally interested in universal education. If the pioneers failed to use the free land for school purposes, he argued, the effect "will long be felt among the people, and while our country is yet in its infancy we hope proper measures may be taken as soon as practicable, in order to secure to the first settlers the benefits which will otherwise fall to others when the country will amply support schools without aid from Government."

The log cabin school had become fairly common in the eight years since Berryman Jennings taught the first school in Iowa at Nashville in 1830. Despite the small and scattered population forty or more schools are known to have existed in Iowaland between the years 1834 and 1838

All were private schools taught by men and women of various ages, married and single. A young Kentuckian, Alfred Rich, was teaching in Fort Madison in 1838. During the same year two "educated and capable" sisters from Boston, a Mrs. Williams and Miss Fanny Pond, gave instruction in their home at Fort Madison. At least a half dozen schools were opened in Burlington for short periods during 1838. Miss Mallard, a "highly educated lady" from New York State, taught at Bellevue. Another Bellevue teacher that year was George Cubbage, who had begun his pedagogical career at Dubuque as early as 1834. At least a dozen common schools were in operation in the various towns along the Mississippi River and probably as many more existed in the hinterland.

In response to the Governor's recommendation, the first Iowa Legislative Assembly passed a law in December, 1838, providing for the establishment of "a common school, or schools, in each of the counties of this Territory, which shall be open and free for every class of white citizens between the ages of four and twenty-one years." At the request of a majority of voters in a township the county commissioners were authorized to form a public school district. These schools were to be supported by taxing the property in the district,

but no one could be asked to pay more than ten dollars a year in cash or "good merchantable produce at cash price". Early in 1839 a few schools were established in accordance with the terms of this act.

Higher education was also available in Iowa in 1838. The Legislative Assembly provided for a number of seminaries throughout the Territory. On January 15, 1838, an act established a seminary of learning at Dubuque for the "instruction of young persons of both sexes in science and literature". Thomas S. Wilson, Lucius H. Langworthy, A. P. Lorimer, Ezekiel Lockwood, Joseph T. Fales, Benjamin Rupert, and Patrick Quigley were named as incorporators.

Four days later, on January 19, 1838, the Legislative Assembly passed an omnibus statute providing for the establishment of ten seminaries in the Territory of Wisconsin, seven of which were located west of the Mississippi: at Fort Madison and West Point in Lee County, at Mount Pleasant in Henry County, at Farmington in Van Buren County, and at Burlington and Augusta in Des Moines County. The seventh institution was to be established in "town sixty-nine, range three west in Des Moines county" and was to be called "the Union seminary of Des Moines county." The act named the incorporators of each seminary.

Two other institutions were established on January 19th. The Davenport Manual Labor College was created for "the promotion of the general interests of education, and 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." Clearly the pioneers were already becoming aware of the need of vocational training.

The second school was styled "the Philandrian college of the town of Denmark". Section seven of the act creating Philandrian College declared: "Persons of every religious denomination shall be capable of being elected trustees, nor shall any person as president, professor, instructor or pupil, be refused admittance for his conscientious persuasions in matters of religion: *provided* he demean himself in a proper manner, and conform to such rules as may be established." Although this particular school never took root, a similar institution, Denmark Academy, incorporated in 1843, was destined to continue into the second decade of the twentieth century.

The pioneers were men of action in educational matters. In September, 1838, Alonzo P. Phelps, "a young gentleman of superior education", spoke on the subject of "Popular Education" in the Methodist Church at Dubuque. The *Iowa News*

believed the town had long felt the need of a public school and hoped there would be a general attendance at the lecture. At the conclusion of Professor Phelps's talk a permanent school was established for scholars of all classes. Those present moved that the seven men appointed by the Wisconsin legislature as trustees of Dubuque Seminary should have "a superintendent care" over Mr. Phelps's seminary.

On March 24, 1838, Mrs. Sheldon informed readers of the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette* at Burlington that she intended to open a school on April 1st. Since spelling, reading, and writing were the basis of education, Mrs. Sheldon expected to pay particular attention to these branches of learning. Courses would also be offered in grammar, geography, astronomy, geometry, botany, philosophy, and history. Prepared by three years' experience and a study of the "most recent and useful modes of instruction" in eastern schools, Mrs. Sheldon believed she would give satisfaction to those who attended her school. She had ordered fifty dollars worth of books and school apparatus for the use of her pupils. Tuition was only four dollars per quarter.

An Academy of Science and Literature in Burlington opened its portals to the youth of both sexes on the first Monday in June. Daily sessions

from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon were held in the spacious upper rooms of the store building formerly occupied by Charles Nealley. In this "convenient and beautiful atmosphere" Principal J. P. Stewart expected to deliver lectures on the natural sciences and such other subjects "as may be expedient for the advancement and encouragement of the pupils." The academy operated on a quarterly basis. Tuition was modest and typical of most schools: four dollars per quarter was charged for orthography, reading, and writing; five dollars for mental and written arithmetic, geography and the use of maps and globes; and six dollars for the Latin and Greek languages, English and Latin composition, algebra, surveying, natural philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, mental and moral philosophy, political economy, bookkeeping, declamation, music, and drawing.

Late in August the trustees of the Academy of Science and Literature notified readers of the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* that the school was operating under favorable auspices. They hoped the fine work of Principal Stewart would "dissipate objections" of many who were fearful of emigrating to the "fertile plains of Iowa" lest they "leave behind them the invaluable blessings of intellectual cultivation." Professor Stewart was de-

scribed as a "gentleman of liberal education, and of that logical and well disciplined mind so eminently adapted to the business of teaching". The purpose of the various departments was (1) to instruct youth in such English branches as will best fit them for the ordinary business of life, (2) to fit for college such as are designed for the learned professions, (3) to prepare young men for the employment of teaching, (4) to give to young ladies such an education as experience has shown to be "most valuable to this interesting portion of the community."

On October 15, 1838, another energetic pedagogue, Henry G. Stuart, opened the Mount Pleasant Male and Female Academy. Professor Stuart proposed to teach "the English Sciences, the Latin, Greek and French tongues, and every branch of science commonly taught in High Schools and Academies." These courses were intended to be "thoroughly taught, without that smattering of science, by which the mind of the pupil is made a lumber-room, without order or harmony". Professor Stuart agreed to give his "most assiduous attention" to everything "calculated to benefit those committed to his care, both in morals and mind".

Mrs. L. T. Clark opened the Fort Madison Female Academy at the residence of James G. Ed-

wards. The subjects and tuition were much the same as at other institutions, and Mrs. Clark asserted that no pains would be spared in promoting the "moral and intellectual improvement" of her pupils.

There were other evidences of cultural aspiration in the Black Hawk Purchase. Early in 1838 some young men of Dubuque formed the Iowa Thespian Association, the first organization of its kind in Iowa. Rehearsals and performances took place in a comfortable room over the Shakespeare House. The editor of the *Iowa News* believed the local players acted in an admirable manner and recommended their efforts to all "lovers of mirth" as "well calculated to drive dull care away in a long winter evening."

In November, 1838, Azor Richardson invited all "who are desirous of becoming acquainted with, or wish to cultivate the science of SACRED MUSIC, to meet at the Methodist Chapel" in Dubuque on the following Tuesday evening. He planned to conduct his singing school on liberal terms and expected to disclose his fee for teaching at the first meeting.

On December 27, 1837, a number of Dubuque citizens met at the home of James L. Langworthy and formed a "Literary Association" upon the lyceum principle. Dr. T. R. Lurton was elected

president, John Plumbe, Jr., was chosen secretary, and R. Farwell was named clerk. Regular weekly meetings open to the public were announced. On January 16th, the subject of banking was considered. "No real friend of Du Buque", the *Iowa News* declared, "can view the formation of this society with indifference." One thing at least was certain, the East would be deeply impressed by evidence of such cultural advance in literary matters.

The next meeting of the Dubuque Lyceum was held in the office of Joseph T. Fales. The subject for discussion was "The Admission of Texas into the Union". A contributor to the local newspaper expressed hope that the lyceum would "lay the foundation of a Library and a Philosophical apparatus, which would tend to elevate the standard of public intelligence, and exercise a very important influence upon our village — which is already growing into importance with magic rapidity." Meetings were suspended during the summer months but resumed in the following December when the public was invited to attend a discussion of the question, "Should any law of imprisonment for debt exist?"

"We cannot feel too much interest in the cause of the Lyceum", declared the editor of the *Iowa News*. "It is the field where mind meets mind,

where taste, views, and opinions are united, or rather amalgamated; and ambition strives for the mastery, and pride seeks for the prize. It is here the bashful first learn to appear before the world, . . . It is here that the first pulsation of talent throbs, creating a desire to be first and foremost in the rank. It is here where genius first unfolds and spreads her wings . . . Here, where there is so much to be learnt, at little expense, . . . It requires but little time: and situated as we are, shut out from the improvements, and the amusements of the world, let us meet . . . and enjoy a rational, an interesting, and useful hour in improving the little talent we possess, and thereby keep pace with other towns and cities of our country."

Another manifestation of the cultural growth of the people is found in the plea of the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* at Burlington for the formation of the "Historical Society of Iowa". After describing the services of such societies the editor declared: "Almost every state of the union can now boast of its Historical Society, each of which is diligently and successfully striving to make the people better acquainted with the history and resources of the state in which they reside. Why, then, we have often asked ourselves, is Iowa without one? Surely her citizens cannot be indifferent to the subject. Our territory, it is true, is yet in

its swaddling clothes, and cannot be expected to emulate her grown up sisters in fostering and encouraging the culture of the sciences or the arts; but we are, on this very account, the better qualified to snatch from the 'stagnant oblivious pool' which must otherwise necessarily soon engulf it, the history of the settlement, cultivation and resources, of this region of forests, and lakes, and prairies, as well as the expulsions of those 'stoics of the wood,' the red men, from it."

The editor believed it was particularly important for such a society to secure the reminiscences of the pioneers in order to preserve the history of Iowa. "What is fact to-day", he pointed out, "will be tradition tomorrow, and the next day it will be entirely forgot." Nineteen years later, in 1857, the hope of Editor James Clarke was realized with the creation of the State Historical Society of Iowa. And exactly a century later, in 1938, this same historical society is gleaning the story of 1838 from the meager records that remain.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN