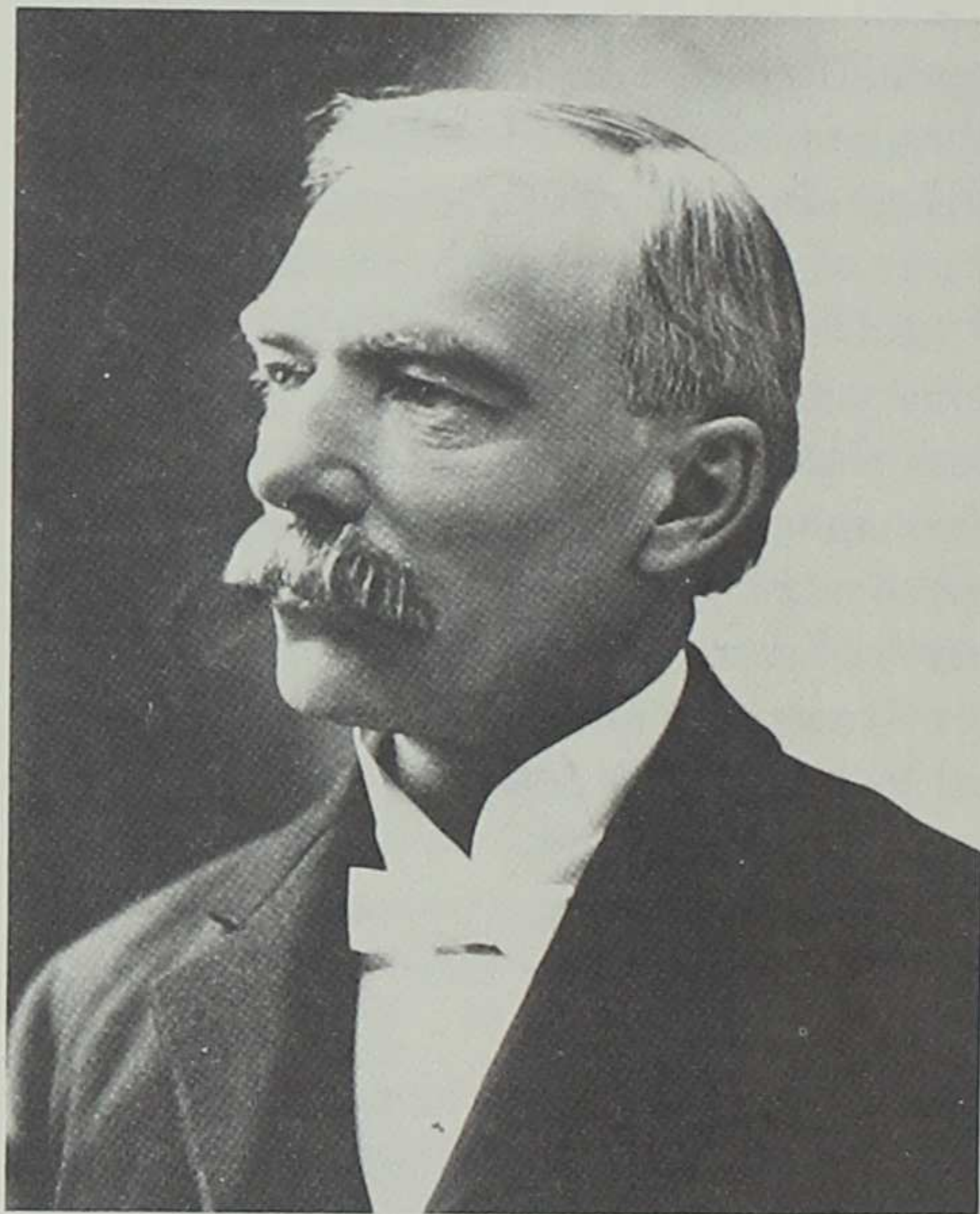


## VIOLA OLERICH, "THE FAMOUS BABY SCHOLAR": AN EXPERIMENT IN EDUCATION

by H. Roger Grant

In the fall of 1900 the Chicago publishing firm of Laird & Lee released a slim volume with the intriguing title, *Viola Olerich; the Famous Baby Scholar*. This book, written by Henry Olerich, is both a treatise on educational reform and a chronicle of the remarkable career of his daughter, Viola Rosalia Olerich. Although today it is virtually unknown, specialists in American literature may recognize the Olerich name. Seven years earlier Henry Olerich had penned the utopian novel, *A Cityless and Countryless World*, a work widely noted in bibliographies of literary utopias and reprinted by Arno Press in 1971 as part of its "Utopian Literature" series.

Henry Olerich began his experiment in progressive education in October 1897 when he and his wife Henrietta adopted Viola from a Des Moines, Iowa orphanage. She was then eight months old. "Our chief object for adopting a child," wrote Olerich, "was to test, in a practical way,



Henry Olerich (1897 photo).

a new theory of education, which we believed to be much superior to any educational system which has heretofore been used." A longtime advocate of women's rights, he additionally sought to demonstrate that a "woman-child can become as expert a reasoner as a man-child." As for how Baby Viola was chosen, Olerich said, "No attempt was made to select a particular child; on the contrary, we desired to get an average child, hence physical health was the only point of pedigree which we regarded of vital importance, and even of this we knew little or nothing."

Henry Olerich labeled his educational scheme the "Natural Method." He argued that it was possible to take any healthy child with average intelligence and, by



*Baby Viola at one year, nine months, seated before a map on which she could locate by name all the states and territories. Her father kept a copious photographic record of Viola's development and intellectual accomplishments.*

manipulating the environment, teach him advanced skills. This would be achieved by gently introducing the child to attractive educational toys and related paraphernalia which would spark and sustain an interest in learning. The child would not be forced to learn ("force always kills interest"); rather, the entire process would be a natural one, purely voluntary play. "I desire to show that a child at a very young age can be a good reader, writer, speller, etc., as well as a real scholar," explained Olerich; "that well-guided freedom in matters of education and conduct produces far better results than coercion does; that interest for learning is immeasurably more productive than force; [and] that no injury can result to the child from the effects of learning, as long as it is left completely free." He further contended that, "a young child can readily acquire a liberal knowledge of such important sciences as Economics, Sociology, Psychology, etc.; that a child which has been properly taught is neither intolerant, revengeful, superstitious, nor prejudiced; . . . that all learning should be done in the form of play . . ."

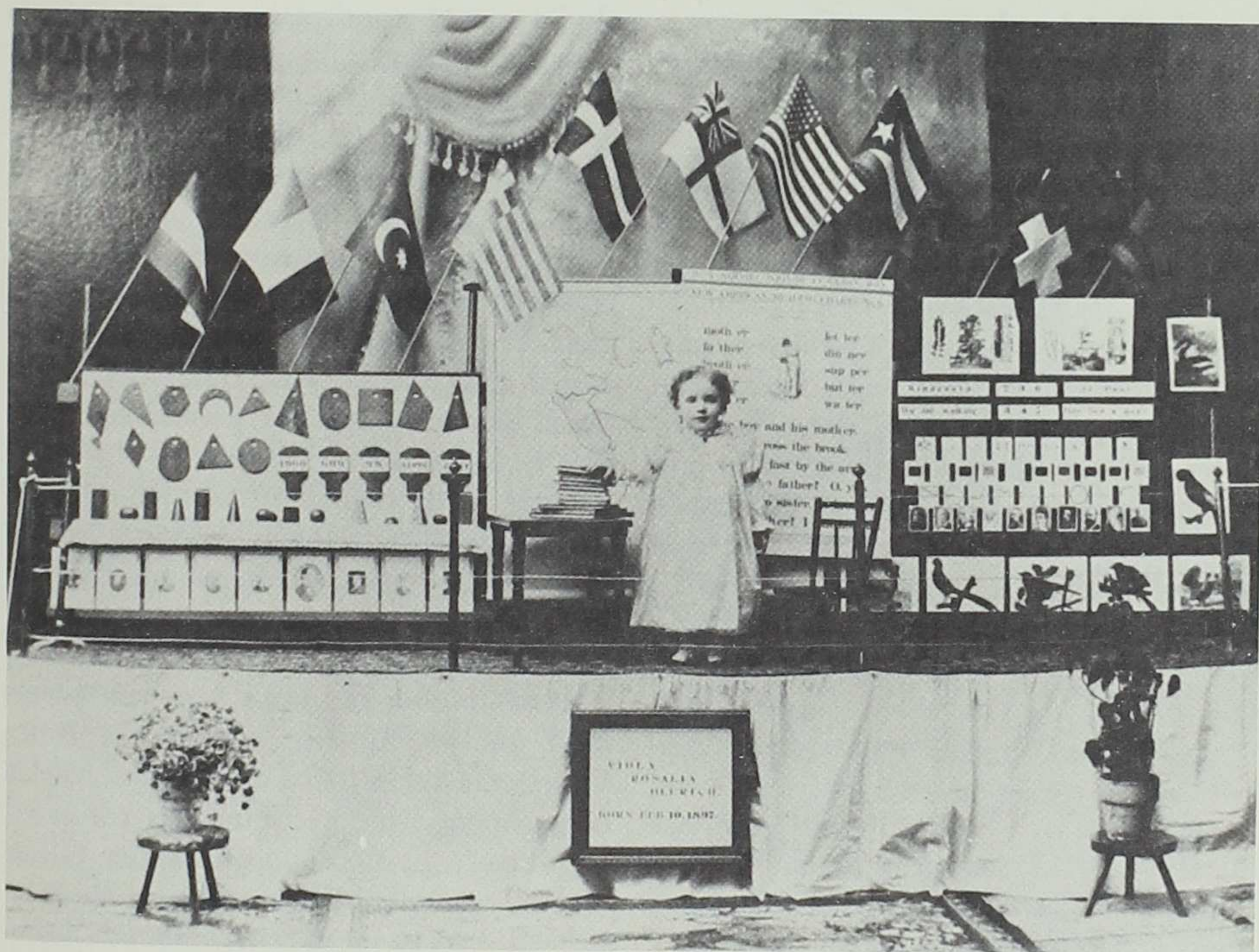
Olerich's "Natural Method" undoubtedly developed in part from his own classroom experiences. Although lacking formal education, he had served for more than twenty years as an Iowa country-school teacher, school principal, and superintendent of schools. Sensitive to the human condition and desiring to promote total equality, Olerich blasted what he called "forced attendance, forced study and forced behavior" in the public schools.

Most educators in that day, however, advocated orthodox pedagogical methods and unquestioningly accepted the "forced" notions. Yet, the decade of the 1890s was a time of ferment in American education. Reform-oriented publications carried reports of new educational theories, and these may have affected Olerich's thinking.

Highly methodical in all his personal activities, Henry Olerich kept careful records of the "Natural Method" experiment. He duly recorded Viola's physical and mental growth. Each week he weighed, measured, and photographed her. Verbal skills, reasoning abilities, and emotional development were meticulously noted.

An early proponent of behavior modification, Henry Olerich emphasized a system of rewards in the implementation of the "Natural Method." For instance, he taught Baby Viola spelling by printing words on heavy paper which he slipped into grooves on the face of hollow blocks. These were hung from a wall, with each block containing a peanut. If she wanted a treat, he explained, "We would ask her to get a block (we called these blocks peanut bottles), having a certain word [on] it. When she brought the block containing the right word, she would first spell the word by sight, then from memory, and also often by sound. In this way she learned to spell readily and pleasantly . . ." Viola, of course, received the peanut as a reward.

Peanuts were only part of Baby Viola's training. At the time of adoption, Olerich called Viola a "cry-baby." But the "Natural Method" soon changed that condition.



*Viola on the platform, probably around 1900. All of the paraphernalia was used in her "act": pictures of prominent people whom she identified on sight; reading books (on which she casually rests her arm in the manner of an assured performer); pictures of flora and fauna; spelling charts; and the flags of nations.*

"We immediately began to teach her to amuse herself by playing on the floor with her simple toys," remarked Olerich. (A skilled carpenter, he made these wooden toys.) "By being . . . busily employed, her habit of crying rapidly diminished, and her disposition became more jovial and amiable."

As Viola grew older, her educational playthings became more elaborate. Olerich, who always permitted her complete freedom to eat as much as she de-

sired, built her a "lunch-counter," when she was a year and a half old. It contained carefully arranged snacks—bread, soda crackers, and cookies. Whenever Viola wanted to eat between meals, she went to the "lunch-counter," opened the lid, and ate to her heart's content. After the snack she neatly put away the uneaten food, closed the lid, and returned to play. He viewed this practice as "not only a useful lesson in establishing a healthy appetite, but . . . also a valuable lesson in

order." Olerich's desire for order, reminiscent of latter-day Montessori educational methods, became an important part of his training practices.

Henry Olerich used books extensively in his "Natural Method" experiment. When Viola was 13 months old, she received her first book. Initially, her father repeatedly showed her the illustrations, which apparently captured her interest. Viola soon brought the book to Olerich for a "lesson." Later, he gave her additional books and even constructed a low shelf in the family sitting-room for the orderly arrangement of her "library." The process of showing and explaining pictures, words, and sentences not only in time taught her to read, but in Olerich's estimation, "cultivated a taste for observation, strengthened attention, developed caution and memory, greatly enlarged her vocabulary and created an appreciation for order and beauty; in fact, . . . started the development of most of the mental faculties."

A year and a half after the Olerichs adopted Baby Viola, he began to exhibit the two-year-old's intellectual prowess. By that time this "beautiful blonde, with brilliant eyes, soft golden hair and a charming personality," had numerous talents. For example, she could identify the nation's currency, the flags of 25 countries, the portraits of more than 100 famous individuals, and scores of seeds and leaves. She could also name and locate the bones of the human body, and she could do the same for 22 kinds of geometric lines and angles. Viola could even read fluently, in-

cluding some simple German and French language passages. In fact, shortly before her second birthday, two examiners, Verna Lumpkin and Martha Campbell, both public school teachers in Olerich's hometown of Lake City, Iowa, found that Baby Viola knew 2500 nouns when either the pictures or the objects themselves were placed before her. The two teachers estimated that she knew at least 500 additional nouns which they could not present to her as either pictures or objects.

Viola made her debut on the stage of the opera-house in the small northwestern Iowa community of Odebolt on April 6, 1899. For the next several years she appeared in dozens of Midwestern communities before church groups, teachers' meetings, and operahouse crowds. At times Viola received as much as \$75 for a week's engagement. Her performances consisted mainly of questions posed by her father and occasionally by the audience. She performed a mere 20 minutes. Olerich, however, presented a 15 to 20 minute introduction and a brief concluding summary.

The *Odebolt Chronicle's* report of Baby Viola's first night activities became typical of the scores of reviews she subsequently received: "Last Thursday evening, Viola Rosalia Olerich, the wonderful baby scholar and intellectual prodigy, made her debut before one of the most appreciative audiences ever assembled in the Odebolt opera house. Only those who saw this exhibition can believe that a child of such tender years can possess so much useful knowledge and display it without the least mental strain . . . ." And the paper con-

cluded, "She seems to enjoy her work, and her action is perfectly free and unembarrassed." But not all newspaper reviews of Baby Viola's varied abilities echoed the *Chronicle*. When "Professor" Olerich brought her to Carroll, Iowa, in May 1899, the local editor expressed mixed feelings about "Viola Rosalia Olerich Prodigy":

Unfortunately it was raining Friday evening [May 19, 1899] and it deprived many people from seeing the performance of little Viola . . . . It certainly is a rare sight to see a little tot like that evince such mature mind. But we do not believe that this child or children in general will be benefited by hot-bed processes that force such mature development. Maturity does not belong to the embryotic stage of plant or animal mind or matter, and we should not overtax the infant forces to effect manifestations that in the natural evolution of child being should come later. So, what Henry Olerich calls the natural method, we believe to be an unnatural method, and we would not permit its application to our young son for any consideration.

Criticism never daunted Henry Olerich. Spurred on by Baby Viola's extraordinary intellectual development, he gave her a Smith Premier typewriter on Washington's birthday, 1900. Two days later Viola took her first typewriting lesson. Within a few days she learned to insert the paper, operate the carriage, and finger the keyboard with both hands. (Typewriters were still something of a novelty at the turn of the century.) By the end of the year Viola's typing speed and accuracy approached that of an experienced typist. Olerich now incorporated a typing demonstration into her repertoire.



Henry Olerich continually sought to publicize his pet educational theories. He contributed an analysis of the Baby Viola experiment to the September 1900 issue of the *Strand Magazine*, a widely-read popular journal. A year later he wrote the *Famous Baby Scholar* book. Although this work sold poorly, he circulated copies among educators and those who advocated progressive school reforms. Moreover, a variety of urban dailies, usually in their Sunday editions, carried largely favorable feature stories on Baby Viola's career and her father's "Natural Method."

Baby Viola retired in 1902. By then her abilities, perhaps with the exception of typing, were not spectacular. As she recalled in 1973, "There comes a time . . . when the baby ceases to be cute, and it isn't particularly novel that the child of five should know these things [flags, currency, leaves, etc.], not the way it is with the child of two or three." Furthermore, Olerich completed the experiment. He had proven to his own satisfaction that the "Natural Method" worked; Baby Viola was tangible evidence of that. For Olerich, this was a common tendency. "When he had finished with the project," remembered his daughter, "[he] was through with it. He was all ready to start the next project."

That next project was not another educational experiment. In 1902, Olerich resigned from the Council Bluffs school system (he had moved there from Lake City in 1899) to embark on a totally different career. Although he was 50 years old (he said on his job-application form that he was younger), Olerich became a machinist for the Union Pacific Railroad at its Omaha, Nebraska carshops. Speculating on why

her father left academe, Viola said, "I think he was beginning to feel that there wasn't enough willingness [among local educators] to accept new ideas." Olerich, whose personality can best be described as crusty, expressed throughout his life a general unwillingness to compromise. Furthermore, he showed disdain for those who did not view the world the way he did.

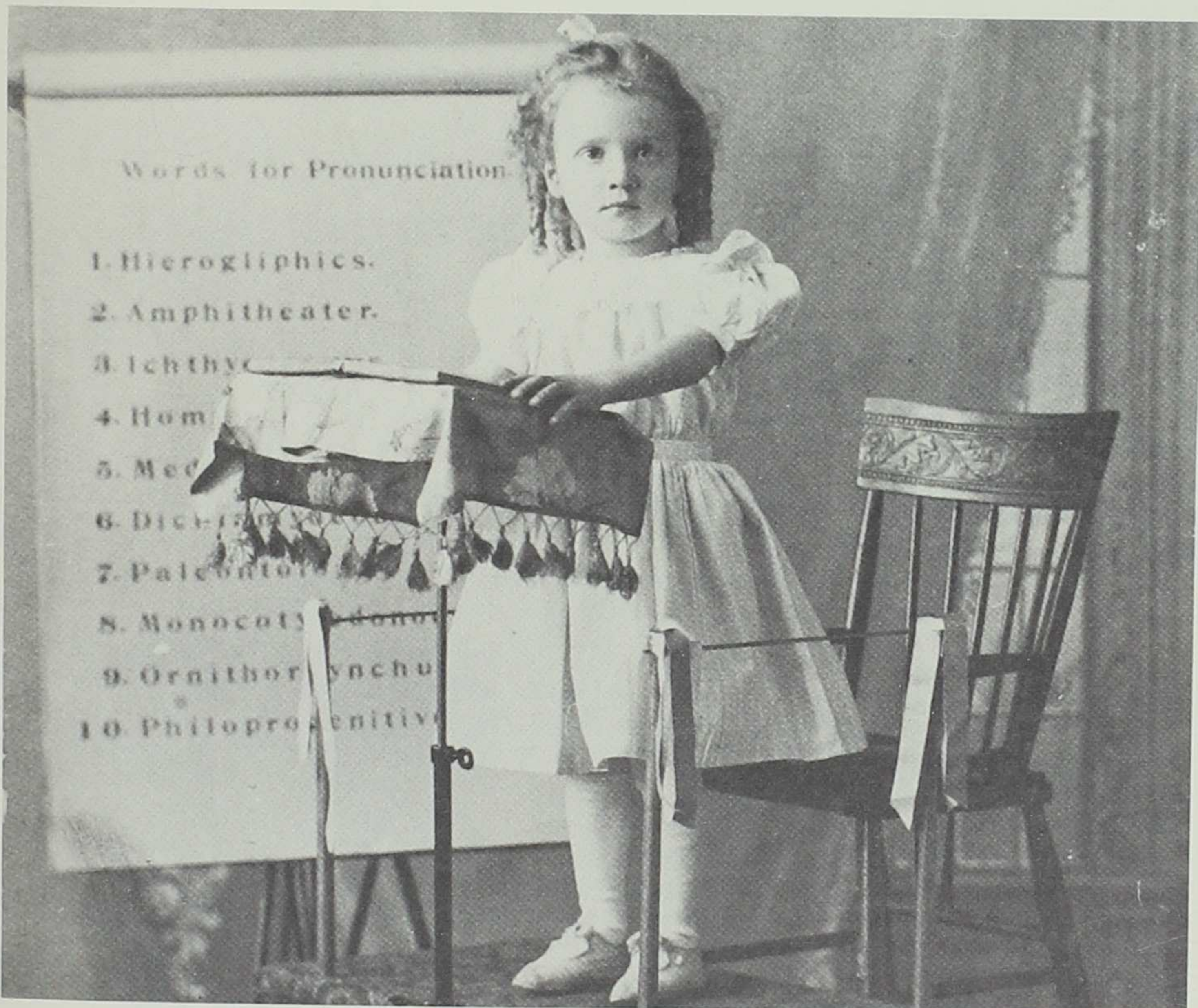
Henry Olerich never abandoned his over-all desire to improve society. During his spare time and after his retirement from the railroad in 1910, he wrote a variety of books and essays that advocated a form of cooperative socialism similar to his grand design for a better America outlined in the 1893 utopian novel. But Olerich seldom mentioned the "Natural Method."

As for Viola, at the age of six she entered kindergarten. She subsequently advanced with ease through public schools in Council Bluffs and Omaha until the illness of her mother forced her to leave after the eighth grade. Although an adaptable child, her early experiences were not completely forgotten. As Viola later reflected, "You don't do [children] any favor by educating them beyond their age group. Little children are afraid of you because you

#### Note on Sources

Viola Olerich Storms of Moline, Illinois provided most of the primary material for this article. Of special value were two works of Henry Olerich: *Viola Olerich, the Famous Baby Scholar* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1901) and "The Cleverest Child in the World," *The Strand Magazine*, 20 (September 1900), 130-36. Conversations with Mrs. Storms were recorded, and a copy of the transcript, "Viola R. Storms Oral History, December 20, 1973," is deposited in the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City.

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*How confident, almost pedantic, Viola seems in this picture. It was taken near the time when she was forced to quit the platform because of "advanced" age.*

know more than they do. And the older ones — some of them will make a big fuss over a little child that knows a great deal and others will consider you an unmitigated nuisance. You're ill at ease with all children after an experience like that."

In 1918, Viola married John Storms (1897-1968), an office employee of Omaha's Cudahy Packing Company. They later lived in a number of midwestern communities before moving to Moline, Illinois, in 1949. The Storms had three children and were a typical Middle Border family.

The impact of Henry Olerich's unusual educational experiment is difficult to gauge. He certainly never achieved the stature of such contemporary pedagogical pioneers as Francis W. Parker, John Dewey, or Maria Montessori. Even Olerich's repeated claim that Baby Viola was the "most advanced juvenile scholar that ever lived" is open to debate. Yet, the experiment reflects both Olerich's desire to improve the quality of American education and the striking diversity of educational experimentation at the turn of the twentieth century. □