

The School on Yellow River

In the days when white settlers were swarming into the Black Hawk Purchase and year by year dispossessing the Indians of their land in the Iowa country, the United States government was conducting an experiment in vocational education in what is now Allamakee County, Iowa. With a schoolhouse designed and built to serve both as a home and a school, with a curriculum embracing courses both cultural and practical, and with a corps of devout teachers, a paternal government tried to provide the youths and maidens of its Indian wards with the tools of civilization.

By the terms of the treaty of 1832, made and signed at Rock Island by the United States of America on the one hand and the Winnebago tribe of Indians on the other, the former agreed to erect a suitable building, or buildings, with a garden and a field attached, somewhere near Fort Crawford, and to establish and maintain therein, for a term of twenty-seven years, a boarding school for the education of such Winnebago children as might be sent to it. The school was to be conducted by two or more teachers, male and female, and the children were to be taught, according to their age and sex, reading, writing, arithmetic, gardening, agriculture, carding, spinning, weaving, sewing, and such other

branches of useful knowledge as the President of the United States might prescribe. The annual cost of the school was not to exceed three thousand dollars.

To Joseph M. Street, the Winnebago Indian Agent at Prairie du Chien, was entrusted the task of selecting the site for the school. Hoping to draw the Winnebagoes across the Mississippi away from the debauching influence of whisky vendors at Prairie du Chien, Street chose a location on Yellow River about six miles up stream from the Mississippi and approximately ten miles from Fort Crawford. At this point there was "a small rich prairie, and a spring rising in the adjoining timber near the summit of the ridge". The surrounding country was mostly woodland interspersed with prairie.

In the spring of 1834, Street let the contract for the erection of the school buildings. He had planned for stone buildings, but the Secretary of War refused to approve anything other than "plain, comfortable log structures at small expense". Street succeeded, however, in securing the main building of stone, a substantial two-story structure with a "ten-foot chimney up the center and a great fireplace in every room". Before the work of construction began, however, he was ordered to take charge of the Sauk and Fox Indian Agency at Rock Island. Consequently the task of supervising the building operations fell to Colonel Zachary Taylor, then commandant at Fort Crawford.

In the meantime Reverend David Lowry, a Presbyterian minister, who had been appointed by President Andrew Jackson as a teacher for the Winnebagoes, had arrived at Prairie du Chien. In the spring of 1835, he opened the school, with his wife acting as his assistant. At first the Winnebagoes did not seem to care for school and few children came. When Street inspected the institution on April 30, 1835, he found only six pupils attending regularly, but he said that the Indians were visiting the school daily, asking questions, and showing a lively interest in both the school work and the adjoining farm. In May, three more pupils enrolled.

During the next two years attendance grew slowly but steadily. A report in December, 1837, showed an enrollment of forty-one pupils — fifteen boys and twenty-six girls. Eleven of these boarded and lodged at the school while the remainder lived in the wigwams of their parents to which they returned at the close of the school day, taking with them rations of pork, salt, and meal which they added to the potatoes and corn of the family larder. The institution furnished clothing to all its pupils, supplying each boy and girl with new garments whenever they were needed.

The increasing enrollment necessitated a larger teaching staff, and accordingly Bradford L. and Patsey Porter of Kentucky were appointed to assist Reverend Lowry and his wife. Superintendent Lowry received \$500 as his yearly wage while each

of his three assistants drew an annual income of \$300 for their services in attempting to bring the white man's learning to the children of the red men.

But the adult Indians gave only lukewarm support to the project, and some were openly hostile. A year later, in December, 1838, the attendance had fallen to thirty-six — fourteen girls and twenty-two boys. This number, however, was as many as the yearly appropriation would adequately care for, and, although the superintendent felt that he could easily secure more pupils, he had neither the room nor the money to provide for them. Of the thirty-six, eleven stayed at the school and the others lived in the lodges of their parents.

Despite the honest endeavors of himself and his assistants, Reverend Lowry felt that the pupils were not making satisfactory progress. He attributed their slow advancement not to lack of intellect, but to ignorance of the English language and to non-coöperation on the part of the parents. He asserted that the adult Indians, failing to appreciate the advantages of an education, sent their children to school more to get them clothed and fed than for any other reason. The unsympathetic attitude of the parents, too, made it difficult to enforce discipline in the school. Irregularity of attendance also retarded the progress of the children. Two and a half years after the school was opened, however, several pupils were spelling words of three or four syllables, and they had made some progress in writing, in trans-

lating Indian words into English, and in counting. The girls had learned to sew and the boys to farm.

A granddaughter of Reverend Lowry thus described conditions in the school at this time: "Zachary Taylor, then commandant at Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien and his wife and daughter used to come over and have dinner at the mission and once Mrs. Taylor brought my grandmother a setting of turkey eggs.

"My grandmother was quite successful in handling the little savages and when they got unruly with the other teachers they were sent to her. They all loved her and sometimes her room would be so crowded with Indian children sitting on the floor and everywhere there was scarcely room to walk."

The year 1839 marked the peak of attainment in the history of the school on Yellow River. Increased enrollment necessitated the erection of another building and the addition of more teachers to the staff. In July of that year, when Reverend Lowry became sub-agent for the Winnebagoes, he turned the supervision of the school over to John Thomas. Later in the year Abner McDowell became superintendent of the school while Thomas devoted his time to the supervision of the adjoining farm. Joseph Mills and his wife Evalina taught during a part of the year, and other new teachers were Minerva and Lucy Brownson and Nancy McDowell.

The December report of the school in 1839 showed an enrollment of seventy-nine pupils — forty-three

boys and thirty-six girls — but only fifteen of these lived at the school. During the year the girls had made two hundred garments, including shirts, trousers, dresses, skirts, coats, and aprons — all the clothing, in fact, required by the pupils in school. When the girls grew weary of their studies, a piece of sewing would be placed in their hands. This device relieved the monotony of the three “R’s” for the girls and, at the same time, served as an aid in discipline. To deprive a girl of the sewing privilege was considered by her a punishment. While the girls sewed, the boys worked by classes in the garden and on the farm. After an hour of work in the fields the boys returned to the classroom in a less mischievous frame of mind.

The maximum accomplishment in scholarship was probably attained during the last year the school on Yellow River was maintained, although there was a decline both in teaching force and attendance. Sub-agent Lowry attributed the decrease in attendance not to an unwillingness on the part of the Indians to send their children to school but to the confusion resulting from the proposed removal of the Winnebagoes to their new home on Turkey River. Out of the fifty-eight pupils enrolled in the summer of 1840, fifty-two attended regularly. The teaching force at this time was reduced to the Brownson sisters and Superintendent Thomas, who replaced McDowell.

At this time the school was divided into four classes. In the brightest group were boys and girls

who studied geography and arithmetic, read fluently, wrote legibly, and could spell with considerable accuracy. In the next class were pupils who studied geography, read in a first reader, could spell words of two or three syllables, and who were learning to write. In the next group were the boys and girls who could read easy lessons, spell words of two syllables, and write a little. The last class consisted of beginners who were struggling with their "abbs".

A visit to the school in August, 1840, by J. H. Lockwood and B. W. Brisbois, prominent citizens of Prairie du Chien, caused them to exclaim in surprise that they had never seen a more orderly and ambitious school even of white children. They were astonished at the progress made by the pupils during the three year interval since their previous visit.

The days of the Indian school on Yellow River were fast drawing to a close, however. On October 1, 1840, the teachers were notified that their services would be needed no longer, as Sub-agent Lowry had received orders to sell the agency and school buildings for what they would bring. This he proceeded to do and the government experiment on Yellow River ended. With the Winnebagoes removed from the vicinity of the whisky shops at Prairie du Chien and with the school relocated in their new domain, it was hoped that more could be accomplished with the Indian pupils than had been possible in the school on Yellow River.

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