

The Webster City Lyceum

"Pursuant to a call of the citizens a meeting was held at the school house" on November 13, 1857, "for the purpose of organizing a lyceum" in Webster City. In the beautiful shaded penmanship of J. M. Jones, the records of the preliminary meeting of this early civic forum declare that E. H. Blair was chosen president for the evening, and the assembled citizens proceeded to adopt a constitution.

It is evident that there had been some preliminary planning as to the purposes and conduct of this society, for otherwise no constitution could have been ready for the consideration of this first assembly. Whether the lyceum was organized in emulation of the flourishing Philomathean Society or as a rival is not revealed in the minutes of Secretary Jones. At all events the constitution presented by E. H. Blair and H. B. Martin was unanimously adopted. "Convinced of the utility of associative effort for mutual improvement," according to the preamble, "of the advantages to be derived by free discussion, and such other exercises as may tend to develop the intellect, expand the mind, and enkindle the higher sentiments of

our nature", the signers constituted themselves an association and elected officers.

E. H. Blair was chosen president. It was his duty to preside at all meetings, enforce observance of the constitution, maintain order, and determine the winning side of regular debates "according to the weight of argument offered." The first vice presidency, a substitute office, fell to J. M. Jones. Cyrus Smith was made secretary with the duty of acting as treasurer in addition to keeping the records. To H. Hoover was assigned the position of editor. The term of all officers was four weeks.

One might be left to wonder why a lyceum needed an editor had not the careful Mr. Jones preserved several copies of "The Webster City Review". This journal, "Devoted to Literary Improvement and Moral Entertainment", was the repository for the literary efforts of lyceum members. Contributions were submitted to the editor who copied such as he deemed worthy in a book — all in dainty Spencerian longhand — and read them at "every alternate regular meeting". Authorship was kept secret and no "editing" was permissible. Most of the stuff was local burlesque.

From a perusal of the constitution it appears that the society was to meet at 6:30 P. M. on Friday of each week. The "initiatory" fee was

twenty-five cents, and dues consisted of an advance monthly payment of ten cents per member.

The record of dues paid shows all members to have paid the twenty-five cents, but the monthly dimes seem to have been rather elusive. In the record of February 1, 1858, it was "announced by Mr. Blair, that on Friday evening, Feb. 5, an election of officers would take place, and in consequence of default in payment of their regular monthly dime, all the members were constitutionally ineligible to office of emolument or trust, and that an election would be illegal, unless the members 'shell out' ". Accordingly the old officers held over until the membership liquidated itself into constitutionality, even though it had to be done in many instances by means of "25 cents in paper", which is indeed an eloquent commentary upon the monetary situation of Iowa in 1858.

With wise expenditure, however, the society lived, and paid its bills. There is no record of rent due for the schoolhouse, but "paid for candles 35c" is a frequent item, and "coal, 1.00", "paper .10" (old fashioned fool's cap) are noticeable entries, while under the date of February 25, 1859, is the notation, "Cash received from former Treasurer, 50c, and 5/6 lbs. of candles". At least no electric light bill was left overdue!

The meetings were to be conducted according

to accepted parliamentary procedure, but in debate, no member was to be allowed more than fifteen minutes at a time, and no one was to speak twice, until all had had an opportunity to speak.

A most interesting page in the old records of the Webster City Lyceum is the one whose caption is "Members". The page is divided into two columns, each headed "Names", and first upon the list is the name of J. M. Jones, in whose mind, no doubt, had originated the idea of this uplifting movement. Then follows: A. S. Leonard, Cyrus Smith, Harris Hoover, H. B. Martin, Emery H. Blair, H. Rhodes, Herme C. Rolff, S. B. Rosencrans, Emery W. Gates, E. A. Howland, (Mrs.) Calista L. Willson, Walter C. Willson, G. Berkeley, A. N. Hathaway, J. S. Letts, (Mrs.) Abbie M. Holt, (Mrs.) C. Rosencrans, Clara I. Maxwell, Emetine Maxwell, W. H. Laughlin, George Refenstahl, T. Billings, Sumler Willson, E. F. Cross, Edwin E. Cheney, Marcia A. Cheney.

Apparently others joined later, for the last eleven names are in very different types of writing from the first list. They are: Josephus Harman, E. F. Cutting, William Pelton, J. R. Burgess, E. W. Letts, Julius H. G. Montzheimer, Thos. N. Skinner (the first Congregational minister in Webster City), Wm. Leonard, A. H. Bell, E. W. Littlefield, J. R. Armstrong.

The little one-room log schoolhouse was at that time the only public building in the town, and, in consequence, all religious, social, and political meetings were held there. The Lyceum was obliged on one occasion at least to give precedence to a church service. Upon "being informed that a religious meeting had been appointed on the same evening [January 29, 1858], the society adjourned to Monday evening."

It is of more than passing interest to find in the record that on the evening of January 15, 1858, the "house was called to order by the president, and Charles Aldrich was announced as lecturer for the evening. In response to the call, the speaker took the stand and delivered a very able and eloquent address on the Art of Printing. The address was highly beneficial and instructive to the society, and reflected great credit upon the author, and the society before whom it was delivered. A motion was made and carried that the address be published in the *Hamilton Freeman*".

Apparently this resolution was not construed to be mandatory, for Mr. Aldrich who was the editor and publisher of the *Hamilton Freeman*, filled the columns of his paper with other matter. Perhaps he wished to reserve his exposition of the art of printing for other occasions. An item a few weeks later indicates that he delivered the same

address to the Philomathean Society on February 23rd. Always active in the interests of culture and civic welfare, his coöperation with the literary societies was perfectly typical. As editor, soldier, and historian he earned an enviable reputation as a good citizen of Iowa.

But there were others who addressed the Webster City Lyceum. S. B. Rosencrans spoke on "Manifest Destiny" in February and E. F. Cross lectured on "Progression" in March. While local talent was most extensively used, able speakers from Fort Dodge and elsewhere were welcome.

But in addition to the formal addresses and the preparation of the improving and entertaining "Review" the club was much interested in debating. What did they argue about in 1858? Some of the topics cause a smile for their triteness, such as, "Resolved that woman has more influence over man than money has." The records show that women won that decision. But when they debated, "Resolved that women should participate in making the laws which concern their welfare" — oh no, the woman side did not win then. Much eloquence of a chivalric type was expended, however, lest the fair sex should be offended.

Reminiscent of the Mormon trek across Iowa more than a decade before, this little forum discussed the question of expelling that strange sect

from the United States. Not all of the subjects were so academic, however. "Resolved that Iowa should extend state aid to assist in building such railroads as are of general and not of mere local importance", debated December 3, 1858, was a vital question among the citizens of Webster City at that time. They were tremendously interested in the westward progress of the Dubuque and Pacific Railroad. Should additional land grants be made and should the towns along the route contribute subsidies, It had been a prominent topic in the previous session of the legislature. Another indication of the importance attached to this question is the fact that the debate was not finished at one meeting, but was carried over to the next session, when the Lyceum "participated in a long and protracted discussion". The final decision was given in favor of the affirmative.

Perhaps the most important question was the one debated on January 14, 1859: "Resolved that the legislature of an organized territory has full power to prohibit Slavery, within its limits." A few months previous to this debate, Abraham Lincoln had propounded this question, in a more subtle form, to Stephen A. Douglas at Freeport. The answer given by Douglas lost him the support of the solid South, and ultimately contributed to the election of Lincoln to the Presidency.

The Webster City Lyceum was doing a really great work in swinging public opinion toward the cause of saving the Union. The members were being prepared for the great struggle. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that many names on the debating list were changed to the army rolls early in the war. H. B. Martin was said to be the first man from Hamilton County to enlist. Granville Burkley and Josephus Hartman joined Company F of the Second Iowa Cavalry, which was organized in Webster City, and Harris Hoover joined Company G. Charles Aldrich left the town without a newspaper, in order to serve the United States. The moving spirit of the Webster City Lyceum, J. M. Jones, resigned his position as Clerk of Court to become a major. Returning to Webster City he was later a member of the State legislature, a capable merchant and financier in Webster City, and a citizen who delighted in seeing the whole community prosper. In the sunset of his life, he enjoyed visiting with the old friends of early days, and to his care and thoughtfulness in preserving these records, we owe the privilege of a bird's eye view of the Webster City Lyceum.

BESSIE L. LYON