

The Means of Education

The fancy for the picturesque which gave to *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* a popularity that has not diminished after a period of fifty-five years may in part explain our current notions of pioneer Iowa education. Certainly the Flat Creek school has become a type to which our minds revert. Not without reason, either, for it was in a similar little log hut in the wilderness along the Mississippi that Iowa's first teacher, Berryman Jennings, taught a handful of children in the autumn of 1830. To be sure more spacious frame structures eventually supplanted the primitive one-room log-cabin schoolhouses, and buildings of stone or brick were not uncommon, but as late as 1862 there were eight hundred and ninety-three log schoolhouses in Iowa, about one-fourth of the total number.

The aims of education were few in those days. All that a child should know, except pure book learning, was taught at home. The regular elementary curriculum consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, and geography. Discipline was strict and moral precepts were emphasized.

Toward the end of the pioneer period the schools were fairly well equipped, and the teachers were predominantly women. In 1867 the super-

intendent of schools in Winneshiek County reported an exception to the general rule. Mr. Lenthal Eells was teaching forty-three pupils in a new log building. The seats were long forms, with four writing desks, each eight feet long — a very inconvenient arrangement. In the absence of a blackboard, the door served in that capacity. The teacher was a versatile man who was fluent with illustrations, “asked many questions not in the book, and required his pupils to think.” Sad to say, however, the floor needed sweeping.

But the pioneers were not alone concerned with elementary schools. Their ambitions soared far higher. In January, 1838, the Wisconsin legislature meeting in Burlington reflected something of the spirit of the times by establishing seminaries for instruction in science and literature in Davenport, Dubuque, Mount Pleasant, Farmington, Augusta, Union, West Point, and Fort Madison. By 1850 fifty colleges had been created by law in a state only four years old and having a population of one hundred ninety-two thousand! It is of secondary interest to learn that most of these colleges existed only in imagination, that only two of those founded in the forties now live — Iowa Wesleyan and Grinnell. Of primary significance, however, is the zeal for education manifested by the pioneers. Though the lamp may actually have burned low for a time, those who held it did not doubt the future. In being thus bold they exposed

themselves to the criticism of extreme folly, for a pioneer population is not made up of young people of college age. Elementary schools, not colleges, were most needed in the new land. But there can be no understanding of early Iowa which does not comprehend the boom spirit which prevailed from the beginning even into the late sixties. Though the material boundaries of the state had been measured by the surveyor's chain and compass, its spiritual possibilities seemed as boundless as the prairie landscape. Where few things had yet been tried, all things seemed possible. It was Adolescence in a Promised Land.

Nor were the first college ventures all bubbles, though, like the infant Harvard, they were for a while only high schools glorified by pompous titles. In due time some of them grew up to their names. If the decade of the forties was an era of paper colleges, the fifties brought more substantial structures of brick and stone. To the credit of self-sacrificing divines, who equalled the Puritans in religious ardor and surpassed them in tolerance, denominational schools sprang up in every part of the state. Cornell College had its origin in the fifties, as did Coe, Central, Upper Iowa, Dubuque University, Lenox, and Tabor. In the late fifties the State College at Ames took legal form, while the State University, established with two branches by a youthful and enthusiastic legislature in 1847, actually opened its doors in 1855.

The means of education in pioneer Iowa were not limited to the schools. The New England conscience, though broadened by frontier conditions, could not rest in the new home until the lyceum had been transplanted. Consequently the voice of the lecturer mingled with the sound of the ringing ax. In the new soil the lyceum waxed luxuriant. It fostered a transcendentalism which welcomed an Emerson rejected at home and lionized an Alcott who was a stranger in his own land.

With the lyceum came an endless number of young men's associations, the founders of most of our present public libraries. Books and magazines were not so plentiful as today, but they were not rare. Newspapers, with apparently the greatest nonchalance, pirated poetry and fiction, so that the writings of Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, and Whittier were read in Iowa newspapers.

The drama, too, ventured into the booming river cities. Concerts were frequent winter diversions, and balls for which military bands played impressive quadrilles provided the social contact which is after all one of the final ends of education. Little sympathy, in truth, does the pioneer Iowan ask of his descendants. Rather does he look toward us with compassion, for his was the day of great hope, when marvelous events were upon the eve of happening.

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