An Iowa Schoolgirl -- 1860s Style

By
Robert E. Belding

"They came to plant the common school
On distant prairie swell . . ."

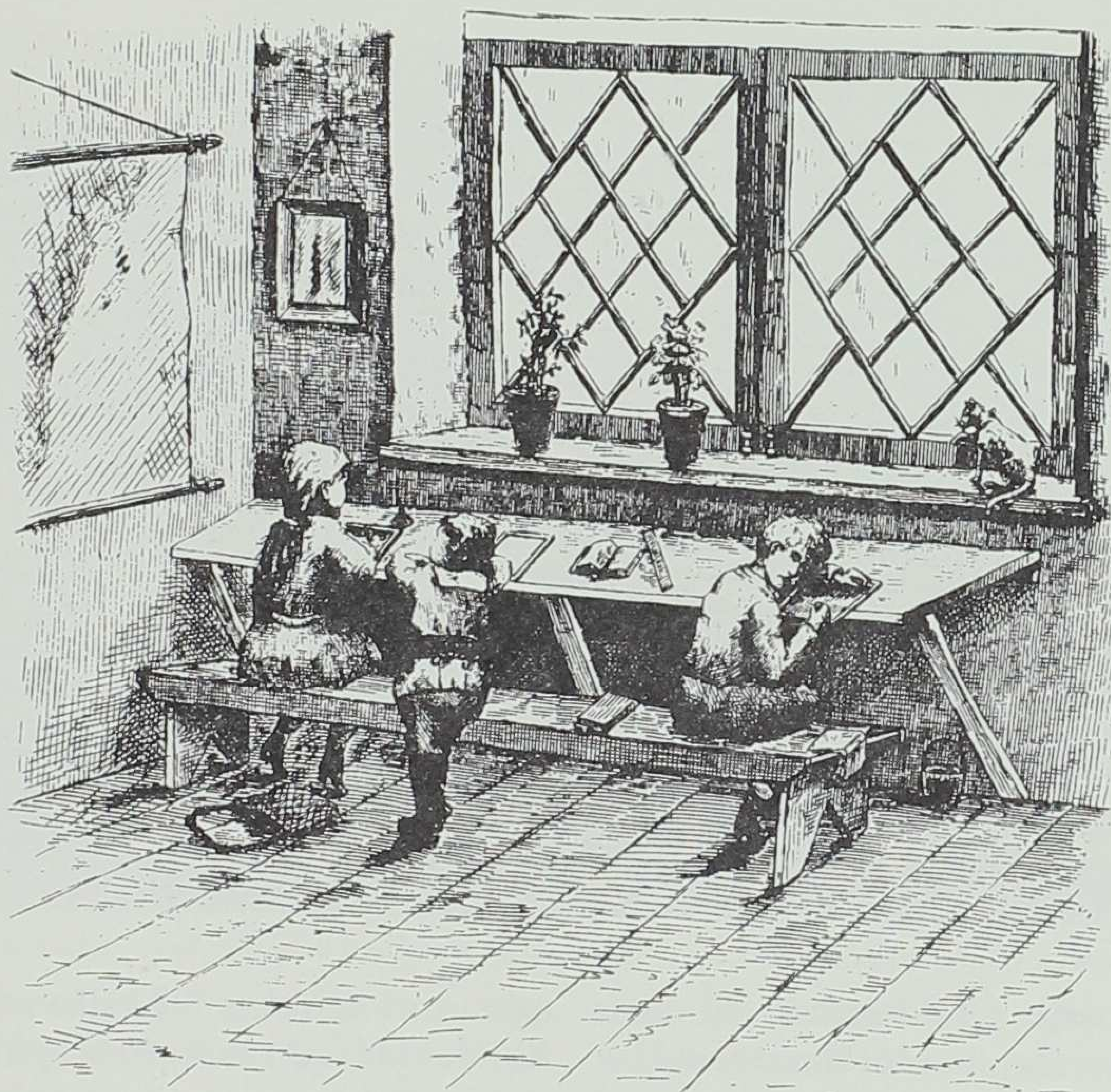
Since those words were written by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, recorders of our American education history have dealt sparingly with early schools beyond the New England area. There has been an enduring assumption that New England set the pattern, and the New England school system simply moved west of the Berkshires as frontiers expanded. Until recently, educational historians have hardly noticed the influence of other areas on educational institutions. Few texts in educational history make reference to Iowa, even though the first state university to accept women along with men was at Iowa City, and the first "chair" for education (called Didactics) was founded at the same institution; furthermore, Iowa was the first state to write its own history of education (Clarence Aurner's five volume *History of Education in Iowa*). It was a mark of frontier Iowa that wherever natives or foreigners with children settled, district schools were established as quickly as a church or a general store.

Let us suppose for the moment that we could be transported backward in time to the year 1860 and the fictitious village of Rudland, Iowa. There we might have met and interviewed Lettie Corbin, a young student in a "typical" district school in eastern Iowa. Lettie was 15 years old and an extremely attractive girl. Her dark hair bounced in natural springs over her sloping shoulders, and her sober countenance brightened only occasionally in a smile. By nature she was a serious young scholar with a mind of her own, seeking out and devouring any available reading materials. She was a committed student, eager to answer the all-American call of the time for more female teachers.

Lettie had already been exposed to the teacher's side of the desk, although at the time of her interview she was still a student in the "winter term" of the district school — a session that lasted each year from the last harvest to the earliest spring planting. Duration of such a school was established by the winter sun, with school starting whenever the sun was "up" and closing just before it was dark. Thus, both the calendar and the daily schedule were controlled by the shifts and caprices of Mother Nature.

Lettie had spent the previous summer helping young boys and girls through what was called the "summer term" — six weeks in midsummer when the most urgent home chores were reduced. Her work in this supplementary school convinced her that one day she would be capable of instructing youngsters regularly in the basics of formal education.

The interview took place one Feb-



(from Benj. Butterfield, The Growth of Industrial Art, *p. 83)*

ruary afternoon following Lettie's school session. The teaching master had stoked the school stove to keep the room warm as Lettie and I sat facing each other on adjacent school benches. We were near the large and drafty classroom windows where the dwindling sunlight provided the room's only illumination. Lettie confessed that "when the sun isn't out, the school session is cancelled, for we have to huddle close to the windows anyway to catch the winter light."

We could hear the irregular thud of axes chopping. An "addition" to the school was under construction — not an adjoining room, but a separate and identical building, several feet detached from the compact structure in which we sat. Already this line of separated buildings had become a distinct characteristic of schools in growing Iowa communities of that day.

In other ways this Rudland school was typical of the frontier institutions in eastern Iowa. It was an unadorned building both inside and out. The novel invention called the blackboard had already replaced individual slates, and this small token of progress had been nailed, not too horizontally, to the bare plaster wall.

Children walked to and from school from the farms that were huddled together for winter warmth and security. In some compact communities children broke the school day by walking home to lunch. No schools provided lunches, nor did children pack them to bring to school with their books. There were no interruptions for recess or bells to punctuate

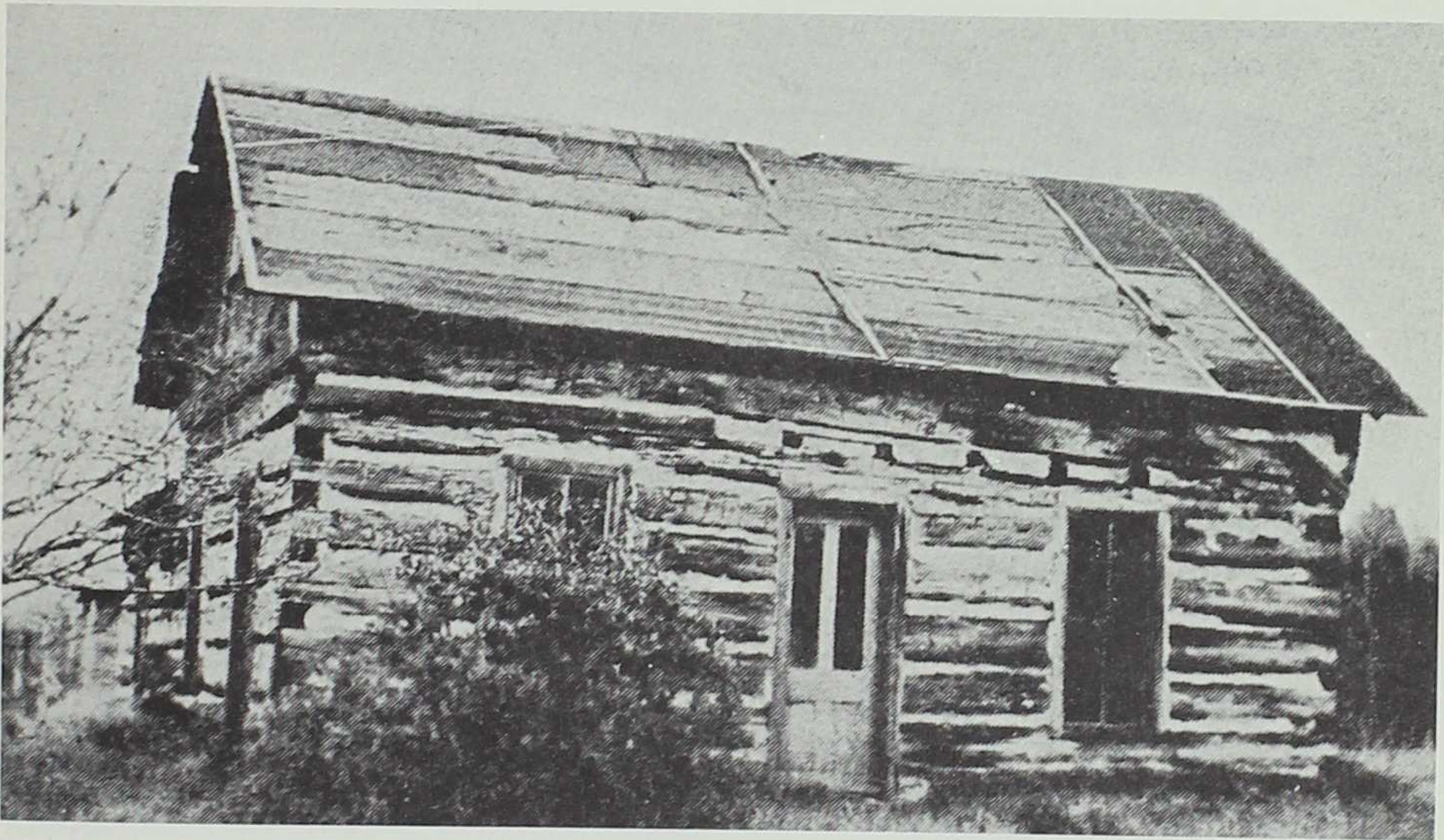
A teacher and pupils, Centerville, Iowa.

the school day. Children of all ages crowded into the single classroom, for this was years before the appearance of school officers to build additional community schools and separate children into different grade levels.

Lettie reported that before she entered this winter school she had attended for several years a summer school containing boys and girls up to the age of 12. In fact, she returned to such a school each June in order to gain some experience in what she hoped would be her future calling. Her summer teacher was a woman, and because pupils there were likely to be younger than in the winter school, they were said to be better behaved. In the current winter session, her teacher was male, as indeed were three out of every four prairie teachers.

"In my earlier schools, everyone studied the same things, but now — during the winter — we have all different ages and subjects," Lettie commented. As she mixed recitation with reminiscence, it became apparent that most of her fellow scholars were boys, yet the differences in their ages and talents were pronounced, with the youngest admitted at age five.

At that moment a fellow pupil passed the window, a gangling lad employed by the village store who returned to the winter session for "loosely two months." This reminded Lettie of another friend who cut lumber as his principal winter occupation but re-entered school "without much of a bath" for a few unconsecutive weeks in winter. "That boy," she recalled, "used to come regularly to school here until he was 12, when most kids his age were here together. He left town to do all sorts of odd jobs, but he came back to school for the winter. He's almost 17 now, and acts embarrassed to be so old and in school. He *is* the oldest boy in our school when he's here.



A log house, used as a country school (author's collection).

"Then there's Olav who lives in the next town, but attends school here. He'll be going off to an academy soon because the schoolmaster discovered that his Latin and Greek were good; then he'll probably attend college. The master told him to get away from home and to use his brains in more schooling. Olav is a sober boy, with nicely-cut, blond hair, and I wish he wasn't leaving town!" Lettie's face pinked visibly from this unscheduled observation, then she hurried on to list other students and their talents. Most appeared to be destined to remain on the farm, but some were uncomfortable there and felt the lure of the outside world. One dreamed of making his fortune in the mines at Dubuque. Another thought of the coal areas of central Iowa. A few even wanted to buck the westward tide and head for Saint Louis or even "notorious Chicago." As she spoke it became apparent that there could be no identifiable pattern among students in this winter school.

Our view of the road dimmed with the vanishing sunlight, but the cherry-red glow from the black stove took over and proved sufficient for me to record the answers to more questions. I asked what was being taught at winter school, and she declared that subjects shifted, depending on who was teaching at the time. The total list of courses she had been exposed to, in more or less complete fashion, seemed overwhelming, but the wide-spread academies, with their broader and more novel curriculums, were influencing even the remotest district schools of the frontier. In a vague way Lettie must have thought the influence good, for she intended to leave home to attend a boarding academy, mainly for the purpose of arming herself with "normal" courses which would develop for her the "powers to teach."

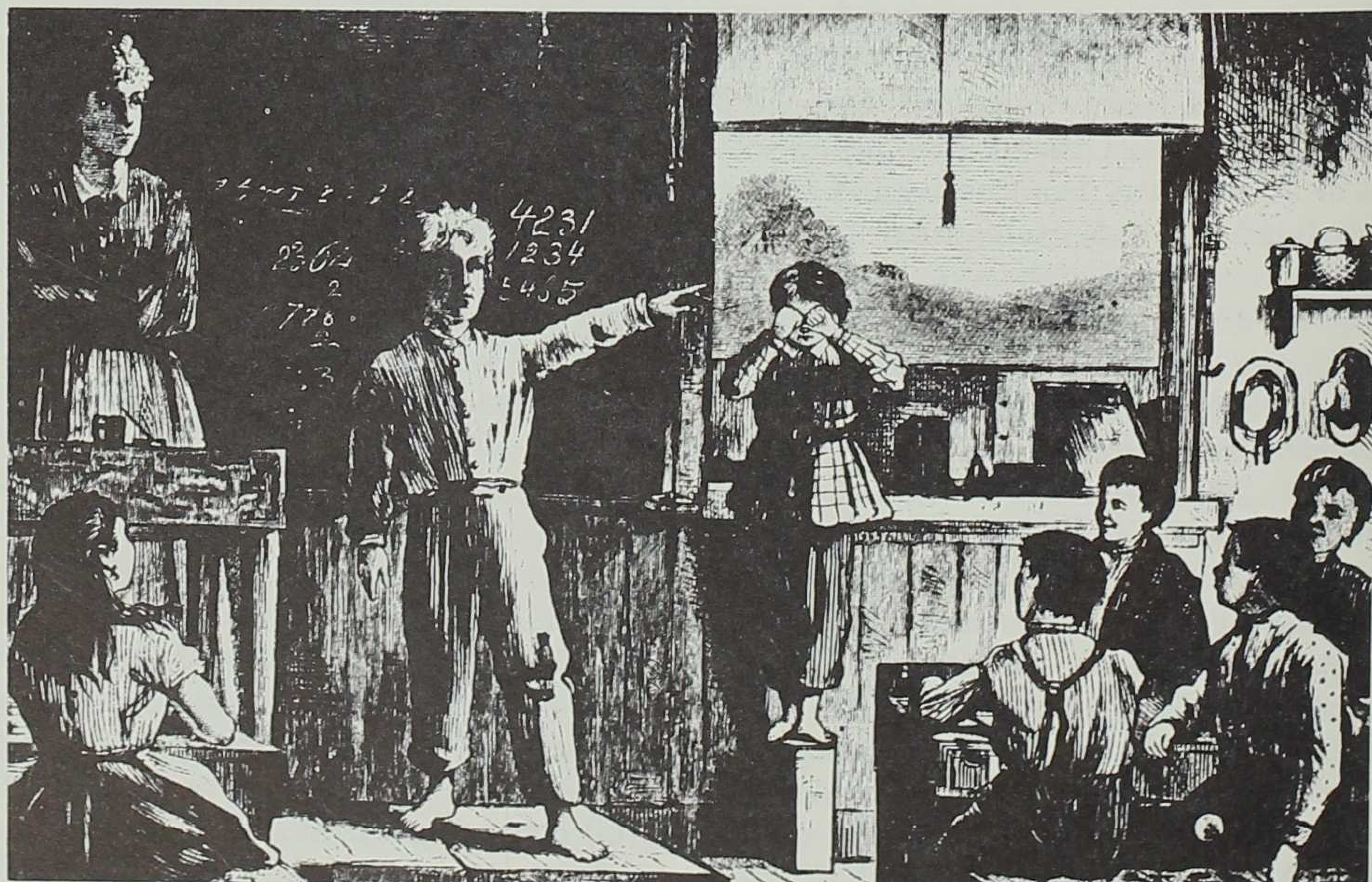
Lettie used her notebook to recall the

courses she had since first entering the winter term. There seemed to be no order of introduction to these courses. They included under the name of English, such subjects as Analysis of Words, Elements of Criticism, and Elocution. "Religion" incorporated Natural Theology, Evidences of Christianity, and Analogy of Religion. Lettie recalled that one gentleman teacher had taught what he called Geography of the Heavens, and for six weeks Government Instruction was taught straight from a civics manual brought west and carefully preserved by the teacher. "That same teacher was a sea captain, so he taught a course in navigation. He didn't stay long, because the bigger school boys chased him out of town with big sticks.

"We had 'Drawing' sometimes as a term course, and while the others were busy with 'lesser studies,' some of the boys studied Greek and Latin to prepare for college. Sometimes we got a little French and German — not enough to be worth much. None of these courses lasted more than three or four months of winter term."

Miss Corbin's current courses were freshest in her mind. In addition to the essential Elocution already mentioned, she had finished Geometry Begun and had advanced into Geometry Completed. The Natural Philosophy she was taking concerned physical phenomena such as the solar system and the earth's rotation, and the textbook for this had journeyed across America, picking up hand-written illustrations and suggested experiments that could be performed with a minimum of rustic equipment.

Lettie's class in literature used a re-



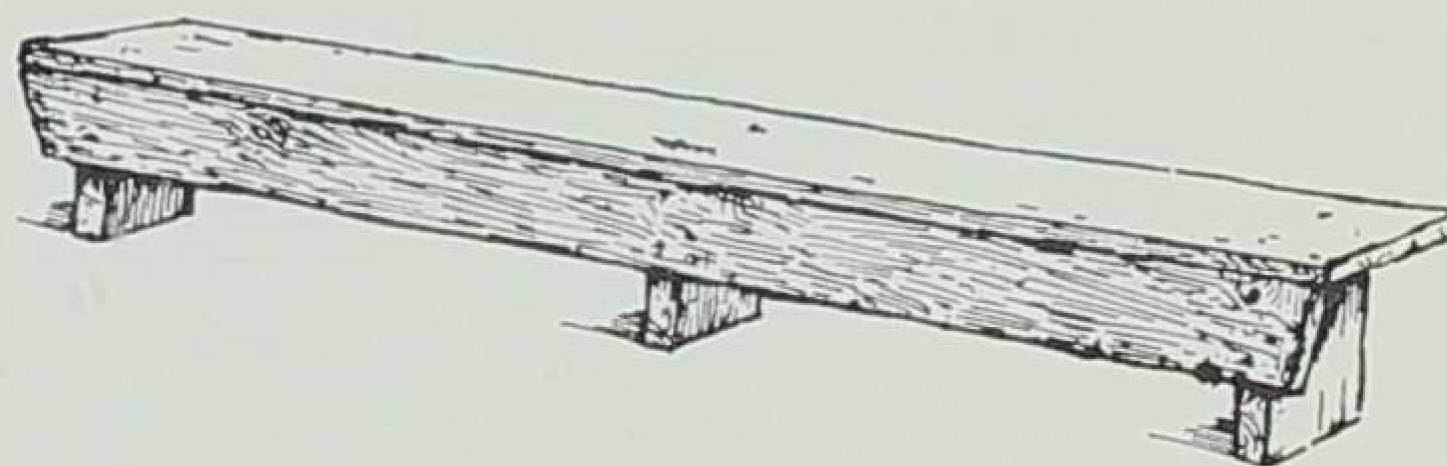
(author's collection)

cently-issued text by William Spalding, called *History of English Literature.* As this book passed among students, they read samples of Dark and Middle Ages Masterpieces, the Origin and Growth of the English Language (which turned out to be the text's uniting thread), and the Specimens of Modern Literature exclusively from England. Included in the text were bland biographical notes on the authors represented.

Nor was the agriculture which enveloped the young students' lives completely neglected at school. Asa Gray's work on Vegetable Physiology was studied, page by page. The main substance of the text comprised 34 lessons, illustrated with wood engravings. The Glossary and Dictionary at the far end of the book helped clarify the technical language which seemed to extend well beyond typical rural usage. The mortar that bound all courses and justified each was a claim that they all, in their own vague way, "cultivated the mental powers."

Lettie recognized an obstacle in her academic life — something existing at school but reinforced at home. Around her, new institutions were being created to accommodate the young, emerging America; there were few regulations to abide by, and endurance and muscle seemed to be more important than brains. This was revealed in the resistance of a number of pioneers to the entire idea of formal schooling, and required attendance was not even visible on the horizon.

Even the winter school Lettie was attending reflected this situation. The teacher was free to teach whatever he happened to know, using whatever textbooks had been stashed aboard his



westward transport. If there was a system to teaching, it was his very own. Teaching aids were sparse, and whatever was used had to be manufactured on the spot by the teacher.

I asked Lettie for an example of teacher invention. She chuckled and told me about the geometry class where the volume of a cone with a sphere inside it was illustrated spontaneously when the teacher placed a wastebasket over his head. "I think we all remembered that lesson preached to us from inside the basket."

Lettie was asked to describe the teachers, who came and went so frequently in winter school. Prudently, she referred to the master who preceded the present gentleman. The teacher had remained for only part of the term, and when he resigned, the school was closed for lack of a master. She characterized him as "typical," saying he had delivered ponderous monologues to the students, with little concern whether his charges absorbed his educated phrases. Lettie confessed that his college education showed through; he had stopped by here on his way west, hoping to find some spot where his Greek would be appreciated!

She graphically described this pathetic figure. Students avoided him, for his whisky breath hovered like a deep-brown fog around his face, nor was that the only identifiable odor that followed the man. He was a gangling fellow, thin and hardly able to remain

(author's collection)

vertical through the onslaughts of the larger boys. His feet were encased in home-cobbled boots, laced high but sliced or deliberately torn down the sides. Once she recalled that his switch, usually applied to selected boys, was replaced one day by an enormous piece of crude pipe with which he whacked a chunk out of his high desk. The alarm ricocheted off the plaster walls, and for ten whole minutes there was not a sound, not even the scuffle of a boy's boot. She recalled that for the first time since school had started that year everyone could hear the sounds of nature through the loose windows of the schoolroom.

If indifferent instructors were not enough, extra emotional burdens were thrust on school-aged children, since they were pressured to decide early their course in life. Many around Lettie had already left home, although this was more a characteristic of boys than of her own sex. Lettie was quick to admit that females in general faced fewer critical decisions; her gender left her with less confusion and a clearer direction in life than was true of her male counterparts. One anxiety both sexes shared had to do with religion. Evangelical conversion was expected by the mid-teen years. Adolescent believers were prone to aggravate the religious conflicts that already existed in the diminutive community. Lettie had seen her own brothers in tooth-busting fist fights with boys from neighboring farms who were raised in a slightly different faith.

The decisions made by confused 15

and 16 year olds were not always the right ones, nor would they "last." Lettie was disturbed by the number of young people who left their homes before they were old enough to understand what they were doing, and she admitted that she was speaking from her own family experience at the very time of the interview. The mobility of the adolescent population, with frequent absences from home, indicated the unsettled quality of this period in life, but, Lettie declared, maybe decisions and confusions were necessary to "growing up."

School discipline was not an immediate problem for Lettie herself, yet the antics of the boys around her were apparent, and the difficulties the schoolmasters had in keeping ahead of the boys' restlessness were incessant reminders to her of youth's impatience if not its treachery. The school chimney that boys had blocked in order to smoke out the master and close the school for the day was but one in a plotted sequence of pranks.

There was good reason for Lettie to wish to work with younger children, before they started to outwit their teacher. I asked her to imagine herself as a teacher in winter school for children and teenagers, but somehow she could not see herself there. The many adult responsibilities already pressing on her moved Lettie to confess that the "children grow up too quickly" in this country.

Perhaps she was too close to later childhood and her own adolescence to observe objectively differences in deportment between the younger children and her own peers; the dividing line between such ages did not seem clear. She felt the older boys were more unruly, and the teacher had to make greater efforts to "break their wills." Lettie confessed that the master's stick was administered more and more as the boys stretched upward in age. As if to explain the constant need of discipline, Lettie declared that it was not easy for boys, who often had become semi-independent, to return to the confinement of formal schooling, even for short periods in the slack farming season. Some boys were already earning their entire living at age 15, and one of her older brothers had been compelled to pay his father in cash for "breaking his domestic contract" in order to join an adventurous band of men headed west.

Once more, Lettie returned to the circumstances in the "conditions" of boys that caused them more uncertainties than the girls of her acquaintance. From her own experience with other families of the area she surmised that a death in the family most often altered a boy's plans, and the male youths she knew had a more bewildering selection of apprenticeships, on other farms or even in other communities, than did the females whose assigned lot seemed to be to help mother and assist in the rearing of younger children within the family. One of her own brothers, formally apprenticed, was compelled by contract to attend winter school for two months of each year, and this reversion to the structured discipline of the schoolhouse was enough to "ruffle his behavior."

Lettie squirmed in discomfort at this recitation of some of her own distressing observations about her present schooling. Thus it did not take much to pry open her memories of the summer term which had started early in her life and to which she planned to return sometime

in the future, but on the far side of teacher's desk. "I began going to summer term school when I was 3 years old, and I was 9 before I started to attend the district winter school. The summer term teacher was Mrs. Rudd, who taught me to read and reckon and write. It was more home-like than winter term, and everyone seemed to behave better. We liked school and paid attention to Mrs. Rudd, because she might tell our parents if we didn't.

"We spent most of our time on spelling; I think I learned to spell before I learned to read. We almost memorized Noah Webster's *Speller.* To me the spelling bees were fun . . . We still have them in winter term."

The light had diminished now to the stove's lonely flicker, leaving amorphous shadows on the classroom wall. There was just time for one last question to Lettie: "Why have you decided to teach?"

Lettie replied that through her experience in summer term she had decided to commit herself to teaching these impressionable youngsters. She thought there was a place for women in teaching, recalling the statement she

had read a few years before, made by Mr. Eads, Iowa's Superintendent of Public Instruction, that it would be well to employ women teachers, since the "tender, patient care, so requisite to the proper development of these young plants" was "more naturally and prudently exercised by that sex."

I joined Lettie to give the fire a final stir and we locked up the schoolhouse. Outside, night had pushed downward and away the brightness, yet ragbags of clouds snuggled each other, some supporting the sky, others piled beyond sight or skimming the horizon. Lettie noted what she called the "extra-curricular" colors — the untamed tints and splotches which extended well beyond the routine reds and pinks she had learned in the classroom. Her sensitivity was bound to help make her a good teacher.

Lettie and I parted after I had thanked her for her cooperation in my peripatetic effort to report student views from our past. She walked up the road, with a pack of schoolbooks under her arm, like the conscientious teacher she dreamed of becoming. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based in primary and occasional secondary sources on the history of Iowa and of the midwest. Principal sources utilized were Clarence Ray Aurner's *History of Education in Iowa*, published by the State Historical Society in five volumes between 1914 and 1920, John A. Nietz *The Evolution of American Secondary School Textbooks* (Rutland, Vt., 1966), Joseph F. Kett's contribution to T. K. Hareven's *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in 19th Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971) and our state author, Henry Stuart's *Development of the High School Curriculum in North Central States from 1860 to 1918*. Of special value were two of Iowa's own productions, "An Account Book of Jesse Barry" in the *Iowa Historical Record* (XIII, p. 110) and *Journal of the House, 1856-1857: Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* from *Iowa Legislative Documents, 1857*.

Less frequently useful sources were found in Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier School-master* (New York, 1957), John S. Brubacher's *History of the Problems of Education* (New York, 1966), Frederick M. Binder's *The Age of the Common Schools, 1830-1865* (New York, 1974) and Harry G. Good's *A History of American Education* (New York, 1956). The case approach used here is especially appropriate to John Higham's delineation of our historical eras established in his *Writing American History* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1970).