

## An Apostle of Free Education

On the first day of December, 1856, a school opened in the town of Tipton, Iowa. It was not, of course, the first school in the town, but it became famous as the first public school in Iowa with grades and a high school department and the first *free* school west of the Mississippi. The Tipton Union School, as it was known, became a sort of model, experimental school on which the system of free schools in Iowa was based. The man who called the school to order that cold December day was Christopher C. Nestlerode, recently arrived in Iowa from Ohio. Large and heavy-set, with auburn hair brushed back in a pompadour, he was a dynamic personality and the young men and women, the boys and girls, who sat before him that day and the days to come never forgot the man or his teaching.

At that time he was thirty-two years of age, for he was born in Center County, Pennsylvania, on March 17, 1824. His parents, Israel and Susanna Nestlerode, may have admired the famous discoverer or hoped that the child would grow to be an explorer. At any rate they named their son Christopher Columbus. Christopher started his travels



early, for when he was six the family moved to Ohio. When he was twelve he helped erect a log schoolhouse in which he attended school part of three winters. Later he attended school at Fostoria and was soon teaching local schools in the vicinity for \$14.00 per month and "boarding around". He soon became an ardent advocate of free public schools.

Just how he came to Iowa — "the Garden of Eden of the Free School Territory of the World" as he later described it — is not definitely known. For some years following 1849, he had been holding teachers' institutes in Ohio. B. F. Gue says that Nestlerode was "visiting" in Galena, Illinois, in December, 1854. Possibly he was participating in an institute there. At any rate, so one story goes, he heard of the State Teachers' Association meeting to be held at Iowa City on December 27 and 28, 1854, and walked more than one hundred miles to attend it. He was impressed by the caliber of the Iowa teachers and by 1856 he was back in Iowa, possibly to attend the session of the State Teachers' Association held at Iowa City in June.

Hearing that the town of Tipton in Cedar County needed a school, Nestlerode walked to the town and on December 1, 1856, opened a school there. His motto, it is said, was: "Whether we die young or old let us die with armor on, striving



to do something to benefit mankind." That something, in the mind of C. C. Nestlerode, was free education, and he became a crusader for tax-supported schools.

Having started his school, Nestlerode became a lobbyist to secure for Tipton in particular, and all other towns which might be interested, authority to levy taxes to support a union, graded school. The bill received influential support and on January 28, 1857, the General Assembly passed a law similar to that in effect in Ohio. Tipton at once established a school under the terms of this act, which permitted districts with 200 or more residents to maintain a school with various grades and to support the school by taxes. Under certain conditions, rates (tuition) might be charged but no child otherwise eligible to attend the school could be excluded because of failure to pay such tuition. In the December, 1857, issue of the *Voice of Iowa*, the first professional magazine published for the teachers of Iowa, Mr. Nestlerode explained in detail the system followed in the Union School.

In spite of the favorable beginning and the enthusiasm of superintendent, teachers, and pupils, trouble soon loomed on the horizon. In the fall of 1857 a new constitution was adopted and authority to enact school laws was assigned to a Board of Education. Before this Board began to func-



tion, the General Assembly passed a new law and repealed previous school legislation, the union school law included. Some taxpayers refused to pay their taxes, but the Tipton school continued until May, 1858, when a meeting was called and the school was voted out. During this fight Nestlerode is said to have coined the phrase "school killers" for opponents of the school law, but he did not give up.

The school law enacted by the General Assembly was declared unconstitutional on December 9, 1858, and the Board of Education enacted a new law. The Tipton voters then decided to re-open the Union School and C. C. Nestlerode was again employed as superintendent at a salary of \$700 per year for a period of ten months. Sessions of school began on April 11, 1859, and continued until March, 1862, when Mr. Nestlerode was recalled to Ohio to assume what he termed "a still more sacred duty", that of caring for his aged parents.

During these years C. C. Nestlerode was a conspicuous advocate of better schools and better teachers and of the support of schools by taxation. He emphasized the responsibility of the government to provide education for all. This struggle for free schools was expressed in the lilting tune and words of the popular song "Uncle Sam's



School" often heard in schools and public meetings during the late fifties and early sixties. Two stanzas and the chorus ran as follows:

Of all the institutions in the east or in the west,  
The glorious institution of the schoolroom is the best;  
There is room for every scholar, and our banner is unfurled,

With a general invitation to the children of the world.

Chorus —

Then come along, come along, make no delay,  
Come from every dwelling, come from every way,  
Bring your slates and books along, don't be a fool,  
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to send us all to school.

Our fathers gave us liberty, but little did they dream  
Of the grand results to follow in this mighty age of steam,  
With the march of education all the world is set on fire,  
And we knit our thoughts together with a telegraphic wire.

But all the enthusiasm of educators and pupils did not make clear the path to universal education. While the pupils at the Tipton Union School became devoted and life-long disciples of C. C. Nestlerode and his coterie of able teachers, school orders "went begging and oftentimes would neither command money, buy clothes, or pay board" and Superintendent Nestlerode was sometimes compelled to send back to his home in Ohio for money to provide necessities for himself and the teachers.



The first number of *The Iowa Instructor*, which appeared in October, 1859, contained the following description of the Union School which had opened on September 29th that year. The school year was divided into three sessions — fall and spring with 12 weeks each and a winter term of 16 weeks. The school was organized in four grades, each grade having three divisions. The enrollment included 75 pupils in high school, 50 in the grammar school, 70 in secondary grade, and 90 in the primary grade. The high school included a "Normal Training Department" with 30 students, most of whom had already had experience in teaching. Subjects taught in the high school included, in addition to the common branches, botany, rhetoric, algebra, geometry, and the theory and practice of teaching. The report also asserted that people were moving into Tipton to secure the advantages of the school and that pupils were coming in from other districts.

But C. C. Nestlerode did not limit his activities to one school. As chairman of the executive committee of the State Teachers' Association, he became editor of *The Iowa Instructor*, published by the Association. The first number appeared in October, 1859. During the next two years he contributed a series of articles to the magazine under the general title, "The Theory and Practice



of Teaching". In these he discussed the training and character needed by teachers, the relation of the teacher to the community, contracts between teachers and school boards, preliminaries to opening a school, the maintenance of discipline in a school, and the minimum equipment required by a teacher. He served as editor of the *Iowa Instructor* for three years and during that time assumed much of the financial burden of the paper — which usually paid only half what it cost.

That these articles and others which he contributed were widely read and well received is proved by a letter written to Mr. Nestlerode in April, 1860, by Jesse H. Berry, county superintendent of Clinton County, Pennsylvania. "God bless you, Brother C. C. NESTLERODE, in the noble struggle you are engaged in — the diffusion of common school education in the growing State of IOWA. I have just read the April No. of the IOWA INSTRUCTOR, and I confess I like it much. There is *fight* in it, and that of the right kind, too. . . . Free Speech, Free Press, and *Free Schools*, thank God, are in the ascendancy *now*, and will continue to be."

During that first winter of 1856-1857, while organizing the Tipton Union School and drafting and supporting the bill which gave it existence, Mr. Nestlerode founded the first teachers' insti-



tute held in the West in the old courthouse in Tipton. His mode of conducting these meetings and the principles of his teaching were based upon the saying, "As is the teacher, so is the school".

Mr. Nestlerode's success as a leader in education was soon recognized; at the State Teachers' Association meeting at Davenport in 1858, he was elected chairman of the executive committee, a position he held for three years. The first year he conducted twelve institutes, traveled 3,700 miles, much of that distance on foot, and gave 712 talks on the need of free schools. Mr. Nestlerode was also chosen to represent the Association at the meeting of the State Board of Education in December, 1858, and was present during the twenty days of the session. It is said that he refused the position of secretary of the Board because he considered his other responsibilities more important.

In modern pedagogical literature, we read of service-training for teachers. Proof that this early educator recognized its importance is shown in the minutes of the secretaries' books which recorded the weekly teachers' meetings held each Monday night for three hours at which regular attendance of all instructors of the Union School was required. The branches taught in all departments were discussed, and the most approved methods for teaching were suggested. One half



hour was devoted to mutual consultation on the welfare of the school and to suggestions, inquiries, and complaints. Mr. Nestlerode said of these meetings: "New teachers were soon led to see that each lesson must be thoroughly prepared before attempting to hear the recitation."

In 1861 he wrote, "I have earnestly devoted my time and efforts for the past four years to secure uniformity of instruction through the school. I am happy to state that this has at length been accomplished. A child can now enter the Primary Department and take regular courses through the school, without unlearning or learning anew anything previously learned in the School."

He might fittingly be named one of the fathers of modern guidance and character education in public schools. "I taught my scholars many things", he wrote, "I taught them how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity; the necessity of living for something; of being prompt in all things — to do to others as they would have others do to them, to love and obey their parents, to stand firm for the right and oppose the wrong, to be good, and to be true to themselves, and to all with whom they came in contact. To avoid deceptive practices in all their relations in life; to accept Christ as their counsellor, and when they needed wisdom, to ask of Him".



His great respect for the Scriptures and the constant need of reading them, although he seems not to have been a church member, he emphasized in many of his articles. Before the Cedar County Teachers' Association in 1857, he delivered an address on, "Should the Bible be introduced into our Public Schools?" "I", said Mr. Nestlerode, "unhesitatingly and emphatically answer 'YES'. I would that the Bible were introduced and *used* in every public school in our State . . . *I will not teach in any school where I am not allowed to read the Bible.*"

In an address given before the Iowa State Teachers' Association in 1857, he gave basic principles concerning free public education which earned him the title, "The Great Apostle of Free Education", asserting: "I believe in the doctrine that the property of a State ought to educate the children of that State. I am aware there are some who claim that this is an unjust doctrine, and shall therefore offer a few arguments in support of it. . . . Good schools enhance and render secure *all* the property in their vicinity alike; therefore *all* the property should be equally taxed to support them."

Furthermore, he argued, every child has a right to an education and this can be guaranteed only by government support, adding: "as each State



claims the right, and enforces it, to punish its inhabitants for crimes, therefore it is not only its *right* but its *imperative duty* to use all honorable means to prevent crimes. . . . If half the money that is expended in criminal prosecutions, building jails, penitentiaries, poor houses, and supporting them, were spent in supporting good schools — educating properly all the children — three-fourths, if not nine-tenths of the crime that is committed, would be prevented, and few poor-houses, jails, and penitentiaries be needed."

If children, for one reason or another, fell into evil ways, C. C. Nestlerode believed it was the State's responsibility to re-educate them. In an address in 1857 he said: "My friends, if ever we expect to reform juvenile offenders, we must educate not only their head and hands, but their *hearts*. Heart training is the only kind that is adapted to the nature of the case — all others *must and will fail*."

At the meeting of the State Teachers' Association held at Dubuque in April, 1857, he offered a resolution that a committee be appointed to present to the next legislature the need of a State reform school for juvenile offenders and was named chairman of a committee of three appointed for that purpose. The memorial, prepared by Nestlerode and J. L. Enos, included the following com-



ment on juvenile delinquency ninety years ago: "Our State, and *especially* the cities and towns, abound with vagrants and truants of both sexes, who refuse to obey their parents or have none or worse than none to obey. These children are mostly destitute and without employment, and would not be inclined regularly to follow any, if they could get it, consequently resort to any means, however dishonest to support themselves, regardless of consequences."

Mr. Nestlerode's personal appearance is best given in the words of one of his students, Zenas C. Bradshaw: "I was at first seated in the high school room, near the door opening into the hall. The room was warm, well lighted, clean, orderly, and quiet. A large, smoothly shaven man entered. His auburn hair was combed pompadour. Instead of coat, he had a long, red dressing gown, and a pair of thin slippers. He came to me directly, and that smiling face and warm handclasp can never be forgotten."

But it was, apparently, in personality that C. C. Nestlerode made the greatest impression on students, teachers, and school board members. That pupils and teachers alike acquired a life-long respect and affection for Superintendent Nestlerode is evident from the records of the reunions held in 1882, 1887, 1893, and 1897, when he was the hon-



ored guest. In 1887 former pupils presented to him a huge album bound in red plush, with silver clasps and a silver plate on which was the following inscription: "Presented to C. C. Nestlerode at the Second Reunion, June 30th, 1887, by the Teachers, Pupils and Friends of the Tipton Union School, from 1857 to 1862." At the reunion in 1893, Mr. Nestlerode was given a gold-headed cane.

Teachers throughout Iowa seem to have held this educator in equally high regard, for in the six years Mr. Nestlerode was in Iowa he was twice president of the State Teachers' Association, serving in 1857-1858 and 1860-1861. It was during his second term in this position that he wrote to Governor S. J. Kirkwood, pledging the loyalty of the teachers of Iowa, some of whom had already enlisted. He added: "if in your opinion we, who are engaged in school room duties, can serve our country better by administering *lead* and *steel* to traitors, than by guarding the unprotected children of our State and preparing them for future usefulness you can *draw* for the remainder, and your draft shall not be dishonored."

C. C. Nestlerode left Iowa in 1862, and little is reported in Iowa publications concerning his work in Ohio, but he was apparently busy in promoting education there as he had been in Iowa. After his



retirement from public school work he devoted much time to Sunday schools and the temperance cause and was president of the Seneca County Sunday School Association for thirty years. He died at Fostoria, Ohio, on December 29, 1900.

According to the obituary notice in a Fostoria newspaper he had married Mary Ann Skinner "in 1870 or about that time" and the couple had one daughter. This was probably the Miss Mary Nestlerode who attended the Tipton Union School reunion with Mr. and Mrs. Nestlerode in 1893. The newspaper indicates that Mr. Nestlerode was wealthy, but there is nothing to indicate the source of wealth. Certainly it was not secured from his Iowa activities, valuable as they were to the State.

Now, after a century of statehood, Iowa pays tribute to Christopher Columbus Nestlerode, the "Apostle of Free Education". To make it possible that all children in this State might have equal opportunities for education, he drafted and promoted passage of Iowa's first law for free public education. Because he knew no school was better than its teachers, he founded the first teachers' institute west of the Mississippi. Because he believed in unity and organization, he helped promote the Iowa State Teachers' Association, and was twice its president. Because he was interested in public education everywhere, he was prominent in the



American Normal School and National Teachers' Association, and was one of the vice presidents in 1860. Because he believed that all teachers needed to be guided, and kept constantly alert to educational movements, he contributed to the *Voice of Iowa*, the first State magazine for teachers, and he became editor of its successor, *The Iowa Instructor*, for three years. It can truly be said of Christopher Columbus Nestlerode that "he planted seed which was not wasted, but found rich soil in the hearts of educators. It rooted and grew, budded and blossomed, and bore rich fruitage."

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