

The YMA of Mount Pleasant

When the Civil War was over and the boys returned home, Mount Pleasant renewed the cultural offensive it had begun when it established the Collegiate Institute more than twenty years earlier. The citizens had struggled all those years to gain permanent possession of the title, "the Athens of Iowa". By 1856 the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad had made the outside world more accessible and had brought many advantages to the ambitious town.

Counted among the cultural assets of the community were Iowa Wesleyan University, the Mount Pleasant Female Seminary, the Howe Academy, and F. R. Walker's Academy of Music. The Mount Pleasant *Home Journal*, a thriving weekly, supplied intellectual, moral, and cultural stimulation. Iowa politicians had recognized the community when they sent James Harlan, the president of Iowa Wesleyan, to serve in the United States Senate. Only nearby Iowa City gave any competition serious enough to threaten Mount Pleasant's cultural ambitions.

The Mount Pleasant citizens, however, felt the need of a winter lecture series and a library, so,

on December 1, 1865, the editor of the *Home Journal* suggested that they revive the "Library Association", an organization that before the war had met weekly at the courthouse for discussions, debates, and speeches. He was recalling the stimulating programs the men and women had enjoyed when their more learned members and visitors from neighboring towns discussed such questions as the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the Fugitive Slave Law, and women's rights.

"Now that the war is ended", the editor urged, "let us hasten to renew our prosperous days and make our long evenings profitable and pleasurable. If we cannot secure the service of professional public lecturers, we know of gentlemen in our own midst who could be induced to give us a lecture occasionally." To the modern movie fans or sport enthusiasts, to whom a lecture is something to be endured for culture's sake, this plea, no doubt, sounds a little strange, but at that time a winter lecture series was considered in many towns the most exciting and gayest event of the season.

Taking the editor at his word, the following summer (1866) the young business and professional men of Mount Pleasant, like similar groups all over the North, organized a Young Men's Association, popularly known as the YMA. Sim-

ilar associations sprang up in towns like Lyons, Dubuque, De Witt, Independence, Cedar Rapids, Clinton, and Davenport. The Mount Pleasant YMA took for its primary objective "the procuring of lectures". Ultimately it intended to establish a library and a reading room.

The first president was T. W. Woolson, a lawyer, but the names of the other officers have slipped into oblivion. However, on January 18, 1867, the *Mount Pleasant Journal* (by this time both the name and editor of the newspaper had changed) announced the selection of a second slate which included: E. A. Van Cise, president; John A. Woolson, vice president; J. H. Whiting, corresponding secretary; W. I. Babb, recording secretary; and J. B. Ritner, treasurer.

The lecture course of 1866-1867 was ambitious, but it was successful, bringing to Mount Pleasant some of the outstanding lecturers of the period. The task of finding such talent was probably made easier through a coöperative association, the Western Association of Literary Societies, that booked lecturers for the member societies throughout the Middle West. For these lecturers, Mount Pleasant was, of course, just one of the stops along the way.

Reverend John C. S. Abbott made the initial appearance on October 31, 1866, with a lecture

entitled "France and Her Emperor", a eulogy of Napoleon I. The *Journal* recorded that he spoke to "a large and attentive audience and although there were many present who differed with him on some of his points, all will credit him with being perfectly sincere and honestly believing himself to be correct in all that he said."

On November 12th, Anna Dickinson, advertised as the "queen" of lyceum, spoke to the largest audience of the season. Union Hall was filled "to its utmost capacity with citizens of Mount Pleasant and vicinity all anxious to see and hear the great female lecturer." According to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Miss Dickinson was accustomed to sweep "the rough floors of many a barnlike lecture room with expensive silks" and she probably impressed her auditors at Mount Pleasant with the elegance of her apparel.

On this occasion her subject was "Something to Do", a lecture that probably pleased many of the women and irritated at least part of the men; for she argued that "woman is in every way equal to and in many cases superior to men." The *Journal* quoted her as advising the women not to "care a snap for public opinion." The editor, undoubtedly shocked by such boldness, commended her on her delivery but added his belief that "there are a score of young ladies in this city who could

get up a lecture containing more reason, more logic and more common sense than Anna's".

On December 10th, the YMA presented as its third number, Theodore Tilton, "the faithful, fearless and able editor" of the New York *Independent*. In contrast to the previous speakers, Tilton chose to discuss a current problem under the title, "The Corner Stone of Reconstruction". The Washington *Press* of January 17, 1867, summarized his talk at Washington, a few weeks later, as "argumentative, pictorial, radical, eloquent, picturesque, witty . . . in fine, a many sided, well compounded whole which with his glowing utterance, elicited from the audience cheers, spiced with hisses from a few incorrigible democrats present." Whether any "incorrigible democrats" were among his Henry County auditors has not been learned, but the door receipts indicated that he spoke to one of the smallest audiences of the season. The New York editor, however, made an impression favorable enough to receive two additional invitations to speak under the auspices of the YMA.

The success of Anna Dickinson probably encouraged the program committee to try another suffragette, Grace Greenwood (Mrs. Sarah Jane Clarke Lippincott), author and poet. On January 18, 1867, she gave a lecture entitled "Heroics

and *Common Life*". Although her crowd was larger than that of the previous month, the *Mount Pleasant Journal*, still in a critical mood and perhaps skeptical, if not even a little irritated at the advocates of "female suffrage", called her effort "interesting and well prepared, but a little old and not well delivered." The reporter added, "Grace has a world wide reputation, as a writer, but her lectures do not add to her reputation."

Next on the agenda was Frederick Douglas, the celebrated negro orator. This "Cicero of the negro race", as the *Journal* called him, had been raised a slave, had escaped to New England many years before the Civil War, had, at one time, been spirited to England to avoid arrest, and was now much respected and in great demand as a speaker. On February 28, 1867, Douglas spoke on "Sources of Danger to the Republic"; in his eyes these were: the immense power at the disposal of the President, secret diplomacy in times of peace, and the vice presidency. According to an account of the same address which appeared in the *Washington Press*, Douglas accused President Johnson of "complicity in the murder of President Lincoln". The *Journal* reported that Union Hall was overcrowded with "both white and black, old and young", but the door receipts failed to equal those derived from the Anna Dickinson lecture.

On the tenth of March, as its sixth offering, the YMA presented Wendell Phillips, a national figure and one of the most polished speakers of the century. At Mount Pleasant, as in other Iowa towns that year, he presented a "double bill". First he gave his perennial favorite, "The Lost Arts", a lecture originally prepared in 1838 and subsequently delivered to some two thousand audiences scattered from Maine to Iowa, in which he criticized the self-conceit which had led many to believe that their generation had made all of the significant discoveries, but pointed out that in the nineteenth century knowledge was no longer hidden in monasteries and palaces.

For the second half of his program Phillips presented "Reconstruction or Perils of the Hour". Newspaper accounts suggest that he advocated the removal of President Andrew Johnson and a firm reconstruction program designed to plant "northern ideas", meaning Republicanism, in the South. According to the *Cedar Valley Times*, this double bill was intended to appease "the less radical elements in the community", who probably disagreed with the political ideas which Phillips expressed in the second half of his presentation. "The Lost Arts" contained little with which such persons could disagree.

The calm, conversational delivery of Phillips

did not impress the Mount Pleasant lecture-goers. The *Journal* reported that "numbers were half asleep . . . Phillips is a dry lifeless lecturer." No doubt his reputation as a leading abolitionist caused many to anticipate a fiery advocate, entirely different from the scholarly Phillips. Other Iowa newspapers expressed their disappointment in the New Englander's performance. The *Keokuk Gate City* (March 16, 1867) described him as "a placid countenanced, benevolent, quietly speaking old gentleman . . . who could scarcely be the terrible abolitionist". The *Cedar Valley Times* explained sympathetically that, because his double bill had hurried him, "the audience missed the fire, the pathos, and argument of Wendell Phillips."

Henry Vincent, an English lecturer, closed the 1866-1867 season on April 5th, speaking on the timely topic, "The Great American Conflict and Friends and Enemies of America in England".

A financial statement concerning the first season of the YMA was published in the Mount Pleasant *Journal* on April 26, 1867. Admissions, probably between twenty-five and fifty cents per person, had produced the following amounts: John C. S. Abbott, \$87.25; Anna Dickinson, \$386.00; Theodore Tilton, \$81.25; Grace Greenwood, \$134.65; Frederick Douglas, \$306.00;

Wendell Phillips, \$246.25; and Henry Vincent, \$95.00, making a total of \$1,336.40 received. The total expenditures, including payments to the seven famous lecturers, amounted to \$873.25, leaving a balance of \$463.15. The sums paid the various lecturers are not recorded, but that season the Dubuque Young Men's Library Association paid Tilton and Abbott each seventy-five dollars for a lecture and Wendell Phillips one hundred and ten dollars.

The young men of Mount Pleasant could be justly proud of their net profit of \$463.15, which gave them a nice balance to start the following season. The *Journal* concluded that it considered the above "a good showing and would like the 'city' of Burlington to compare figures." Having participated in several ticket sales campaigns in recent years for similar causes, the author believes that the Mount Pleasant YMA of 1866-1867 accomplished a feat which would be difficult to duplicate even today.

The YMA continued to function three more seasons. The year 1867-1868 saw the appearances of Benjamin Franklin Taylor, Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw), Rev. W. H. Millburn, Anna Dickinson, Henry Vincent, and Edward Livingston Youmans. Included in the 1868-1869 program were Theodore Tilton, Judge George

G. Wright, an Iowan, Petroleum V. Nasby (David Ross Locke), and, for the third time, Anna Dickinson. The 1869-1870 season brought Susan B. Anthony, Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Theodore Tilton, and perhaps others. Evidence points to the conclusion, however, that the initial season was the best.

It appears that the YMA of Mount Pleasant made at least an effort to make good its second plank; in 1868 a library was opened in the office of a Dr. Marsh and Miss Laura Marsh served as librarian. The nucleus of this library was several boxes of books which had been acquired by the old "Library Association" before the war and stored in the office of the *Journal*. From the earnings of the lecture courses, the YMA was able to pay the rent for the reading room, hire a librarian, and buy additional books, but the project was short-lived. In the summer of 1870 the members of the YMA decided to disband, possibly because of the rising cost of the more popular lecturers. The library was abandoned, the books purchased with funds of the YMA were divided among the members, and the volumes of the earlier group went back into their packing cases.

A more successful start was made in 1872 by an energetic group of women under the leadership of Mrs. Louisa M. Marsh and Mrs. C. T. Cole,

who formed the Mount Pleasant Ladies Reading Circle, later known as the Ladies Library Association, or simply L.L.A. It still meets. Standing as a monument to their many struggles and discouragements is the present Mount Pleasant Public Library.

In spite of its brief life of only four seasons, the YMA played a commendable part in the struggle to make Mount Pleasant the Athens of Iowa. Like similar groups in the State, some of which had long lives, it had brought to the community a number of the most popular lecturers of the day and awakened the community to the significance of hearing various shades of opinion on public issues and the need of a library to provide books for all.

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