

DAVID SANDS WRIGHT

THE PALIMPSEST

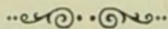
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Founding the Normal School

Before the close of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Iowa was one of the most backward States in the Union in the matter of teacher-training. While Minnesota had three State normal schools, Wisconsin four, Illinois two, Missouri four, Kansas three, and Nebraska one, the Hawkeye State had none. There were private normal schools—real and alleged—galore. Courses in pedagogy were offered in the State University and in the numerous denominational colleges; yet no institution for the professional training of teachers was mothered by the land “where the tall corn grows”. Progressive teachers, seeking the best in pedagogical training, had to go to Oshkosh, Kirksville, Emporia, Carbondale, or other prosperous and approved training schools in adjoining States. Thus Iowa was fairly shamed into action, and early in the year

1876 the first and only Iowa State Normal School was established.

Cedar Falls was chosen as the site of the State training school for teachers, because that city chanced to have within its environs a sightly plot of ground and a big brick building that belonged to the State. Situated about two miles southwest of the business section of town, the tract was guarded on the east by a board fence eight feet high, as if to prevent an invasion of the prairie with its riotous wild flowers. West of the fence stood a plain, three-story brick building, surrounded by playgrounds and gardens, yet seeming to frown at every one in sight. It was the home built by a grateful State to house the children orphaned by the Civil War. Meanwhile, the orphans had grown up and had left the shelter of its roof. Here was a commodious building and the State needed a place for a teachers training school. Eloquent boosters of "The Lawn City" convinced the legislators at Des Moines that, with slight remodeling, the Soldiers' Orphans' Home could be transformed into a school of pedagogy.

In accordance with the provisions of the bill creating the institution, a board of six trustees was appointed by the Governor of the State. This body met in Cedar Falls for the first time in June, 1876. Two major problems confronted the trus-

tees at their initial meeting. The first was that of providing for such a remodeling of the "Home" as would adapt it to the purposes of an educational institution. In almost every particular it was found unsuited to the ends desired. Dormitories had to be converted into recitation rooms; the heating plant had to be reconstructed from basement to attic; children's desks had to be replaced by seatings for adults; in short, an asylum was to be converted into a school. One redeeming feature the building did possess — it was well supplied with lightning-rods.

The second major problem concerned the selection of a corps of instructors, who should serve as the first faculty of the school. The small appropriation of funds at the command of the board limited the number of instructors to four. With only one dissenting vote, James C. Gilchrist was selected as the man among many candidates who was best qualified to be the first principal. Professor Gilchrist assumed the headship of the Department of Mental Philosophy and Didactics. To Moses W. Bartlett was assigned the Department of English Language and Literature, to D. S. Wright the Department of Mathematics, and to Miss Frances Webster the Department of Geography and History. Professor Bartlett, a graduate of Dartmouth College, was then a middle-aged

man of dignity and erudition. Miss Webster was a graduate of the Pottsdam State Normal School of New York. She was chosen on the recommendation of the head of her alma mater and because the "Pottsdam Methods" had become a term to conjure with in educational parlance. She was young, ambitious, and too pretty to continue long at the teacher's desk. Through her, the famous "Methods" became a permanent inheritance of the new Iowa institution.

The first Wednesday of the ensuing September was appointed for the opening day of the school. This date was premature, however, for the reconstruction of the building was far from complete. The sound of the saw and hammer was still to be heard in the basement and in the corridors and rooms above when the students arrived. Moreover, the weather man frowned upon the enterprise. Monday had been misty, on Tuesday the mist had become a drizzle, and by Wednesday the drizzle was a cold September downpour. The chill penetrated the unfinished building. There was no artificial heat to mitigate the cold and all went unmerry as a funeral. Shivering flesh and chattering teeth and weeping eyes within were in unison with the lowering clouds and the dripping eaves without. Everybody was strange to everybody: it was impossible for the teachers to smile

the welcome that they felt. There was little comfort in the Virgilian thought, "Hereafter it will rejoice us to be mindful of these things." The only partially comfortable people in the building were the cooks and the maids who huddled about a dilapidated cook stove — a relic of the "Home".

On this most memorable morning, summoned by the twanging of an iron triangle, the four faculty members and the twenty-seven waiting students gathered at the hour of nine in the Assembly Hall. The principal stood "aloft in awful state", his associates beside him on a raised platform, and rapped for order. With a manner worthy of a larger hall and a greater company, he proclaimed with stentorian voice: "The Iowa State Normal School is now in session." To the accompaniment of an antiquated church organ, a hymn, not inappropriately chosen, "Nearer My God to Thee", was sung. The principal then read a portion of Scripture, and offered a brief prayer. An afternoon session was announced; a roll of the charter-member students was taken; and, after a half hour's session, all were left to shiver through the remaining morning hours as best they could. Thus inauspiciously began the life of the institution destined to become the Iowa State Teachers College.

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