THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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Quaker Boy

Those benches were hard, especially for a small boy who must sit on them quietly throughout two hours of silent Meeting. Was it really two hours? I cannot be sure. Perhaps as the watch in my grandfather's pocket ticked, it was only one; but as a boy's impatience grew, and his hunger sharpened, it was at least two.

And yet I do not recall any unbearable restlessness. I found Meeting generally pleasant, especially for the first half of it. Here were all these good people — our neighbors — sitting with us quietly, clean in their First Day raiment, clean in their hearts and minds. Each was retired a little into his own cell of contemplation, but all were together in the sight of God and man.

As I look back upon those Friends' Meetings, those assemblies on benches within bare walls, of good people whose spiritual ears were attuned for a while to the still, small voice, they seem to me a grand object lesson in the immanence of God — that doctrine beloved of the New England tran-

scendentalists. Indeed, Ralph Waldo Emerson once told a distant relative of mine (James Mott, husband of Lucretia) that if he could bring himself to subscribe to any established creed it would be that of the Society of Friends. What drew him toward this "peculiar people" was their dependence on the authority of the inner voice, so perfectly and simply exemplified in the congregational waiting on the spirit in Meeting.

My grandmother once gave me a copy of *The Essays of Elia,* which she valued for its piece called "A Quakers' Meeting." "The Abbey Church at Westminster hath nothing so solemn, so spirit-soothing, as the naked walls and benches of a Quakers' Meeting," wrote poor Lamb, whose spirit often needed soothing. "Here are no tombs, no inscriptions," he continued; "but here is something which throws Antiquity herself into the foreground — *Silence* — oldest of things, language of old Night, primitive discourser, to which the insolent decays of moldering grandeur have but arrived by a violent and unnatural progression. How reverend is the view of these hushed heads, looking tranquillity!"

Though these things were not much discussed by the Friends I knew (certainly not in eloquent terms), I believe they were adumbrated in the thinking and feeling of the group and the community. For myself, I felt them easily and lightly, as a boy feels and understands the verities; and they

afforded me, as I now look backward over the years, a kind of mild joy.

Meeting was pleasanter in summer than in winter. In cold weather the iron heating-stoves had to be replenished interestingly and with some noise; but the air was heavier and more somniferous, and Meeting seemed longer, and there was likelier to be a crying baby in the "women's part." But in summertime, the Meeting-house was a part of the quiet country scene. Through the open windows drifted familiar rural sounds. There was the stomping of the horses hitched in the sheds nearby — horses patient as boys must be against the time of driving home to First Day dinner. There was the cawing of crows holding their own Meeting in the trees of our Meeting-house grove; but such raucous disrespect of Sabbath calm served only to emphasize the general quiet. There were the occasional liquid notes of a meadowlark; sad voices of the turtle doves, sounding deceptively far-off; the distant bawling of a calf and the barking of a dog, the light hum of bees — those country sounds which were as much a part of the Iowa landscape as the growing corn and the feeding cattle.

Perhaps my thoughts should have been more religious, but the trouble was — and is — that I have never been quite sure just where common life leaves off and religion begins: body and mind and soul seem never to keep decorously each to its own precincts. I know that always on these occasions I

was fascinated by the appearance of the elder Friends who sat "facing meeting"; and for hours I would study those wonderful faces, compare them in my mind with portraits of famous men in the books of biography in my father's library, and try over and over to delineate them in words. It was my own private, harmless game.

For those who have never had the experience of attending an old-fashioned Friends' Meeting, I must explain what the Meeting-house was like and how the people were seated. I shall describe here the Hickory Grove Meeting-house, near Yankee Corners, east of West Branch, Iowa, as it stood in the 1890's. It was later "improved" somewhat, with thin cushions for those hard benches, and roofs over all three of the porches. But the building I tell you about here conformed nearly enough to the houses of worship used for many years in England and America by the "Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers" — to use the phrase often employed by Quaker writers themselves.

The Hickory Grove Meeting-house was in the country, and it suited the country landscape of fields and farms, modest homes, groves and streams, dirt roads. It was a plain, white, one-story structure without steeple or stained glass. There was a porch on three sides of it, roofed over on the "women's part," to afford seemly ingress and egress, for there were no lobbies nor foyers inside, but only the plain meeting-room of the con-

gregation. This room was divided down the center by a partition (invariably pronounced "petition") which separated the benches for the women from those for the men. During First Day and Fourth Day Meetings, this partition was rolled down so that it stood only as high as the backs of the benches; but at Preparative Meeting and at the Seventh Day business sessions held in connection with Quarterly Meeting, it was raised, and the men and women met separately. But even when the shutters were down so that men and women might worship together, the "petition" was an effective barrier of attention, for the eyes of the worshipers, when not lowered, were always straight ahead. Always? Well, almost always. Young men's glances sometimes sought out pretty faces beneath the short bonnets which the younger women wore, despite partitions; but however conscious the girls were of such inspection, answering smiles would have been "unbecoming," and feminine eyes were strictly controlled, if mounting blushes were not.

There was no pulpit in this church, for regular preaching was precluded by Friends' testimony against "the hireling clergy." Nor was there any organ, for Friends classed music with dancing as an incitement to vanity and lust, and a lure that might turn one's steps toward a path infested with strange will-o'-the-wisps of evil and bordered by bright flowers of sin. No; within this Meeting-

house, all was bare simplicity, suited to the contemplative silence which was the badge of its character.

There was an aisle down the middle of the "men's part," and a similar one in the "women's part," and also a space between the benches where most of the congregation sat and the "facing seats." Three "facing benches" looked toward the rest of the Meeting — as a preacher faces his congregation — and each one was raised a step higher than the one before. Thus the highest "facing seats" looked out over the little gathering from a slight point of vantage and honor: here sat the eldest and most respected men of the Meeting. And on the highest "facing bench" and in the seat next the partition sat the Friend who officiated as "head of Meeting."

My grandfather was head of Hickory Grove Meeting for many years. He was a kindly, patient man, a mystic (as all Quakers must be mystics), and the most simple-hearted man I have ever known. What I mean is that, in spite of the many troubles and serious misfortunes that he encountered, his feeling of the nearness of God was so powerful that there were few complications and no real problems in his own life: he could accept all that came with equanimity. For me, he expressed then and now the essence of Quakerism, which is an inner fire of divinity, quite without pride, and with perfect simplicity.

Those old men who sat in the "facing seats" had a fascination for me that I still feel. The names I have forgotten, or remember but vaguely. Neighbor Joseph Armstrong was big and burly, with a florid face and liquid brown eyes. Daniel Pierce was a tall, gaunt man with lined forehead and furrowed cheeks and bristling white hair. I wish I could remember the name of the good Friend, short and roly-poly, who always kept his eyes closed during Meeting. Grandmother assured me he did not sleep, but was merely resting his eyes; certainly he never snored, nor did his head bobble. Isaac Thomas always kept his hat on throughout the Meeting; it was a high-crowned, brown straw hat which Isaac pulled down until the brim rested on his ears and eyebrows. Several of the men wore their hats all through the service. Others came into Meeting and seated themselves hatted; then, if it was more comfortable on a hot day, having made their testimony, they laid their hats aside. This was all a vestige of that bold gesture by which George Fox testified to his consciousness of the God-within-him by wearing his hat before King and Bishops. But, hatted or hatless, these old men arrested attention by the marks their features bore of strength and weakness, of patience and calm. They were faces weathered by toil and life, and sometimes by thought and suffering.

Grandfather's face was singularly unlined and serene, and his clear grey eyes bespoke a soul at

peace with man and God. I heard him preach only once, and then he spoke simply and in a mystical tone: it seemed to me he was chiefly quoting Scripture. Joseph Armstrong spoke in Meeting much oftener, and he was wont to fall into the sing-song which distinguished much Quaker preaching and which was a result of yielding fully to strong emotions during utterance. Whatever the custom among primitive Friends may have been, I think that at Hickory Grove in the nineties there was some quiet disapproval of the high, cadenced type of address as being overwrought and unseemly. I remember Grandmother remarking over the stewed chicken of a First Day dinner that "Joseph got to going pretty high this morning." Grandfather made no reply; somehow I sensed his mild disapproval of Joseph's performance, and of his wife's comment as well.

But most of the Quaker preaching I remember was inclined rather to monotone than extravagance. There was not much hell-fire and brimstone in it, though there were some rather vague threats of that Outer Darkness into which sinners shall be cast. There was much Paulist exhortation, and the admonition to keep ever in mind "the mark of the high calling" still seems to me more typical than anything else of the preaching I heard in the old Hickory Grove Meeting-house.

Once in a while some Friend was moved to lift his voice in prayer; he then knelt on the bare floor,

while the congregation stood and the men all removed their hats. But it happened many times that nobody was moved to speak at all during Meeting, or to pray aloud, and we would have some two hours of what Rufus Jones once called "the corporate hush and stillness of silent meeting."

The last half hour was the hardest for the small boy, especially since he did not know whether it really was a half hour, or an hour, or five minutes. There was no clock, nobody looked at a watch, no bell rang. It was Grandfather's official duty to "break Meeting." That, like the preaching, depended, theoretically, on the movement of the Spirit; but I always suspected that the movement of Grandfather's stomach had something to do with it. I think he never failed to "break Meeting" promptly at twelve o'clock. This was done by the little ceremony of turning to the Friend who sat next to him on the top "facing bench" and shaking hands with him; then that Friend turned to the one next him and offered his hand, and soon everyone was shaking hands throughout the Meeting, and rising, and moving slowly outward toward the porches, talking and visiting.

Outside there was a weekly reunion of neighbors — an exchange of greetings and of news about relatives and acquaintances. If the weather was inclement, the visiting had to be done mostly within the meeting-house; but in the fine weather

of summer and fall everyone lingered on the porches for half an hour or more and "spoke with" everyone else. This was before telephones came to the country districts, and neighbors a mile apart would often exchange words with each other only at First Day Meeting. And there was another factor that added interest to this visiting. Since Friends were not permitted to marry outside the Society, the family inter-relations between them all had become many and complicated, and the health of second or third cousins (who had perhaps moved to California or Philadelphia) and the activities of the whole closely integrated group were matters of strong interest to all. It seems to me that health and crops and babies were the main topics of this babble of conversation.

"And how is thy rheumatism now, William?"

"Oh, it's still pretty miserable. How are thee and Liddy?"

"I've been well as common, William, but Liddy is still pretty poorly."

Or it might go like this:

"What do you hear from Ellwood and his family?"

"Oh, we had some fine news from them, Amos. They have a new son, born on the third day of Seventh Month — and Hannah and the child are doing well!"

"Well, I do declare! This is their third, isn't it? And all boys?"

"Yes. They did hope for a girl this time, but the boy is healthy — weighed nine pounds and ten ounces!"

And always there were many conversations like this:

"Now, Ruth, we are expecting thee and Richard to dinner today. It won't be much, but—"

"Oh, Abbie, thee oughtn't to do it! I do hope thee won't go to any trouble —"

First Day dinners were wonderful. The cooking was all done on Seventh Day, leaving only the minimum of warming and table setting and coffee making for First Day. What baking, and cooking and "redding up" on Seventh Day! Enough to tire out the women folk. But as a result, things were all ready on First Day morning, and there was a proper calm before Meeting.

The only excitement on First Day morning came from dressing in one's best — including Grandfather's putting on a boiled shirt and his First Day suit and Grandmother's arraying herself in her First Day bonnet. Grandmother had three of those long bonnets — a black one not quite so long for visits to town and for Fourth Day Meeting; a longer brown-silk one for First Day; and finally one that I was allowed to see only two or three times — her Yearly Meeting bonnet, a beautiful long grey-silk one, made especially for her in Philadelphia and kept in tissue paper in the lowest drawer of the secretary against the time

when Grandfather and Grandmother made their biennial pilgrimage to Ohio Yearly Meeting. Also, of course, there were the smaller calico bonnets for home wear.

But the First Day bonnet seemed to me very fine. And it was exciting to climb into the buggy behind old Nell and set off for Meeting, though Hickory Grove was less than two miles away. The buggy was high, and not easy for Grandmother to enter. There was a small iron step on the outside, which was all right for men; but Grandfather always drove round to the "uppen-block" to make it easier for Grandmother to get in, and for the three of us to settle into the high, narrow vehicle. Of course, those "single buggies" were designed for no more than two occupants, and even a small boy (if he was a little too big now to sit on his grandmother's lap) could barely crowd in. So Grandmother had neatly covered a yeast-box with some remnants of old woolen clothes; and, placed on the floor just back of the dashboard and between my grandparents' legs, it was a satisfactory seat for me in the buggy, while indoors it served as a footstool. If Nell, in flytime, switched her tail in my face (and a horse's tail is a very keen lash), I bore it with fortitude broken only by childish remonstrances directed against the heedless mare. Nell and Bell were Grandfather's two farm workhorses. I was discouraged from calling Nell "Nellie," because of the tempta-

tion to apply a similar diminutive to her team-mate — an impropriety of language to be sedulously avoided. Nell was always chosen for the single buggy, being a better driver. Her only fault was a terror of "thrashing engines"; in the fall, when threshing outfits were moving from farm to farm, propelled by their puffy little steam engines, it was not safe to have Nell on the road of a weekday. On First Days, however, Nell shared in the general serenity of the countryside, and would negotiate the distance to Meeting just about as fast as a man would walk it. Grandfather never urged her: we started in plenty of time, and we knew Nell had had a hard week's work on the farm.

Coming home after Meeting, it was another story; then Nell "smelled her oats" and was a far livelier nag. Hunger had sharpened all our appetites, and we were looking forward happily to dinner. Living close to Meeting, we usually brought home as guests some Friends who lived farther away — and perhaps some close neighbors as well. Fowl from our barnyard, meat canned last winter at butchering, vegetables out of our garden in season, fruit from our orchard and berry patches, and Grandmother's famous pies and cakes — better than Lucullan were these homely banquets. Grandmother served two pieces to each diner — apple and custard, for example. This, of course, was in addition to the fruit and cake. We did ourselves well.

After dinner we all gathered in the parlor for visiting. I was never much interested in this talk of my elders, since it was again mostly about relatives, and many of these I had never seen. Often such discussions ran into knotty genealogical problems:

"Thee remembers thy third cousin Obadiah Scott, don't thee, Jonathan?"

"Oh, yes, the one that moved out to Salina, Kansas."

"That's the one. Well, his second wife was a niece of Mary's stepfather — thee knows — John Young." Mary was the speaker's own wife. He now gets to the point: "Well, I was wondering what had become of their oldest girl. She would be a second cousin once removed of our children, and we ought to keep track of her."

"Seems to me I heard she married a Worthington — I think a son of Daniel Pierce's cousin — Samuel, is it? — Samuel Worthington?"

And so on and on, until all became rather sleepy after the heavy meal, and the women adjourned to dishwashing and the men to look over Grandfather's pigs and crops. And the boy stole away to a favorite hide-out in the orchard, to read and nap and dream through the long, warm First Day afternoon.

On Monthly Meeting days, Friends returned to the meeting-house in the afternoon to decide on any actions to be taken by the group as a whole.

Then, and at the Preparative Meeting preceding Quarterly Meeting, their deliberations were presided over by no chairman and led to no votes. The only official was the Clerk, who "made a minute" of any action agreed upon. All decisions were reached by agreement of all rather than by majorities. Here doubtless was an advantage to the negative of any question, for if no agreement were reached, the matter had to be dropped; yet often this was meant only a postponement of the issue while older Friends "labored with" recalcitrants — so that eventually there was agreement, or what passed for it.

At Preparative Meeting the eight disciplinary queries were propounded, so that if any Friends were behaving unsuitably to their profession, report might duly be made. Thus it was that my own father and mother were reported, when I was a child in arms, under the Sixth Query: "Do Friends maintain a faithful testimony against a hireling ministry?" They had moved from a farm in the Coal Creek community of Quakers to the town of What Cheer, where Father had bought a newspaper; and there they had begun attending the Methodist Church. The minister of that Church doubtless received an inadequate salary, after the custom of the times; but he was beyond doubt a hireling. There ensued a time of worry and heartbreak, while Friends labored with my parents. It was a bitter separation, for Grandfa-

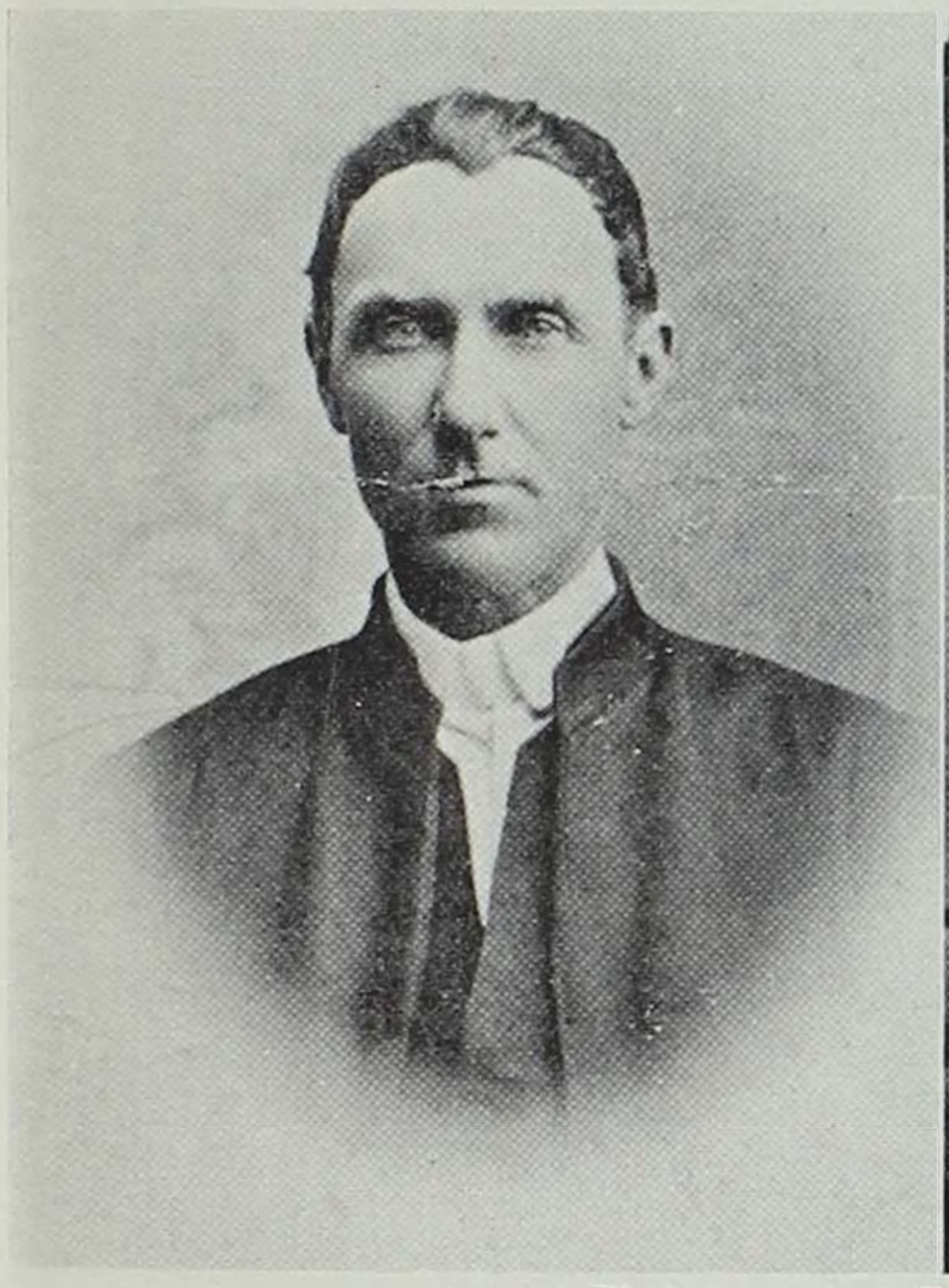
ther especially; but Father felt strongly that the testimony of Wilbur Friends with regard to cultural matters and amusements, and their peculiar customs, were a straitening influence which he and his family must abandon. In my boyhood I heard much talk that went back to these anxious and soul-searching times. At length, however, my grandparents had to yield, and David Charles and Mary E. Mott were "disowned." ("Dizzoned" was the word in my childhood, and it meant something very special that "disowned" can never mean.)

My brother and I, as too young to understand, were not "disowned," however; and so far as I know our "birthright" in the Society of Friends was never cancelled, despite our sampling of other faiths. I think that as long as Grandfather lived, both he and Grandmother kept the hope that we boys might come back into the fold. What I have written here about old Quaker life and customs comes mainly from my recollections of long visits to my grandparents' home near West Branch, and later to Grandmother's at Whittier, Iowa.

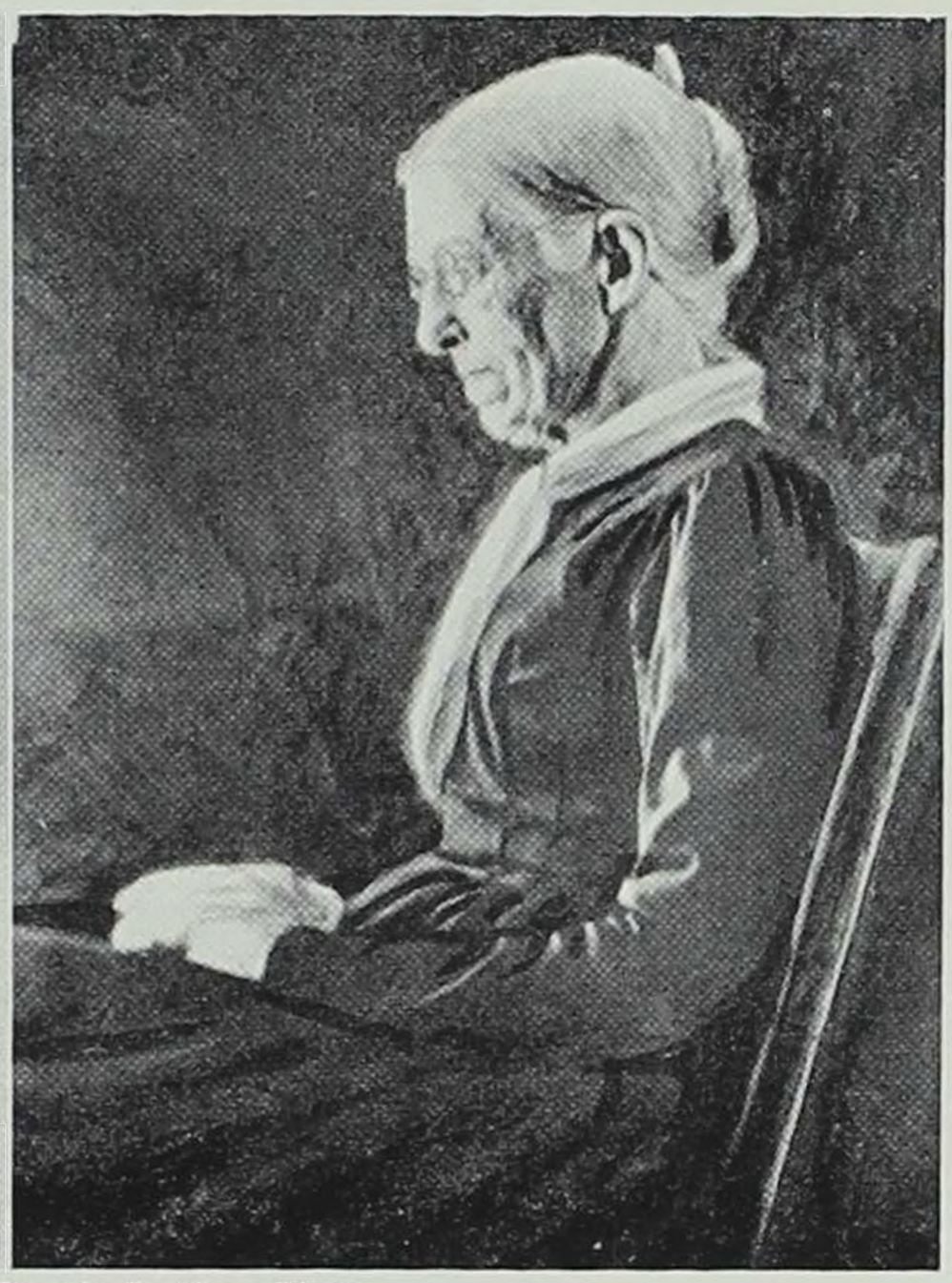
The narrowing influences of the Wilbur Friends of which my father complained were, first, their testimony against music; second, their intolerance of most art and contemporary literature; and third, a general restriction of association to Friendly circles.

So far as music and the fine arts were concerned,

THE GRANDPARENTS OF FRANK LUTHER MOTT

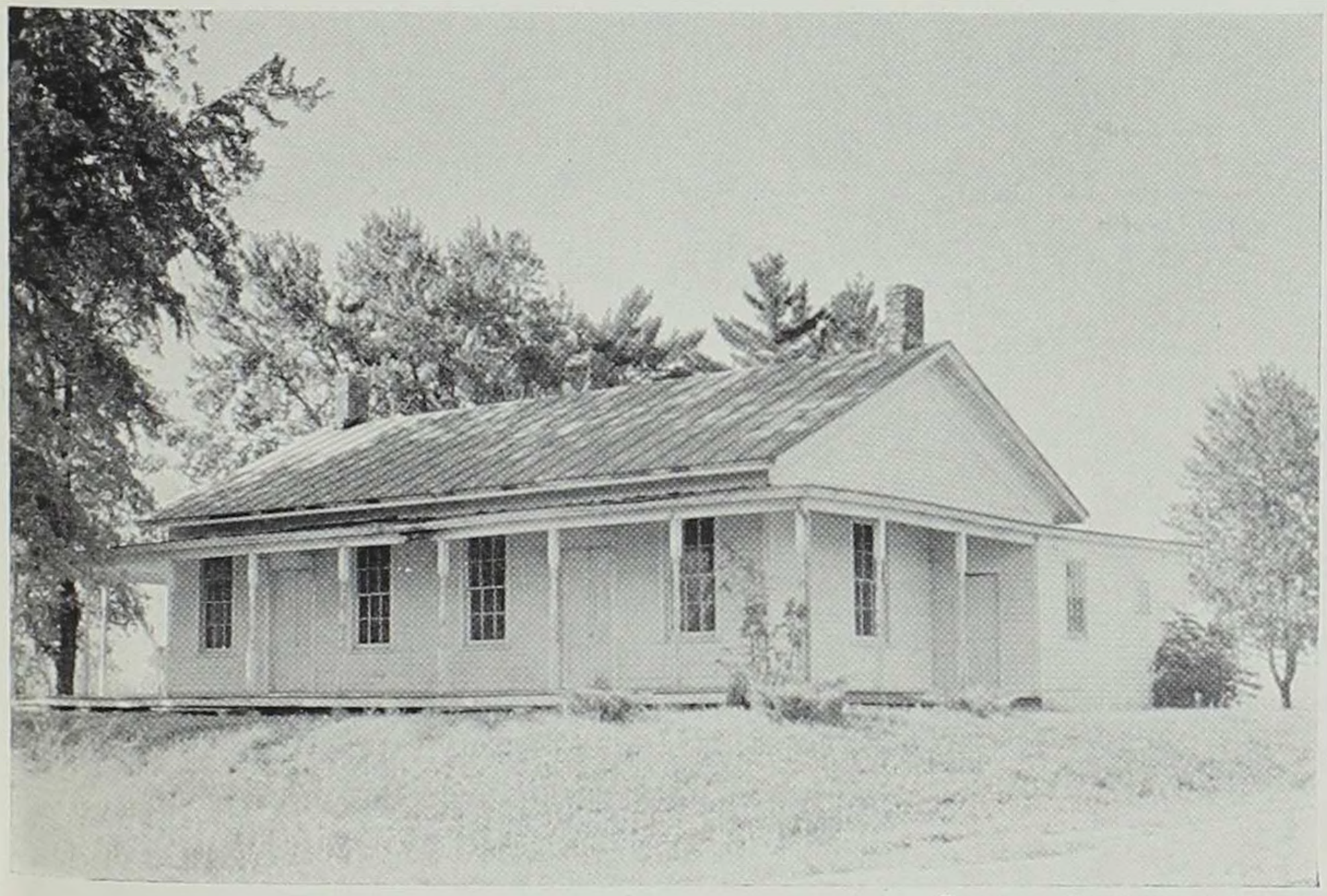


GEORGE WILLIAM MOTT
1834-1898



ABIGAIL BALL MOTT
1835-1918

Photos courtesy Frank Luther Mott



Courtesy Scattergood School

Hickory Grove Meeting House

Courtesy Scattergood School

Scattergood Students in 1892-1893. In addition to four Motts such names as Embree, Bowles, Benson, Thomas, Hampton, Hearst, Heald, Blackburn, Battey, Woods, and Dyer are represented above.

Scattergood Students in 1892-1893. In addition to four Motts such names as Embree, Bowles, Benson, Thomas, Hampton, Hearst, Heald, Blackburn, Battey, Woods, and Dyer are represented above.

Scattergood Seminary

BE IT KNOWN

To all to whom these Presents shall come

THAT THIS

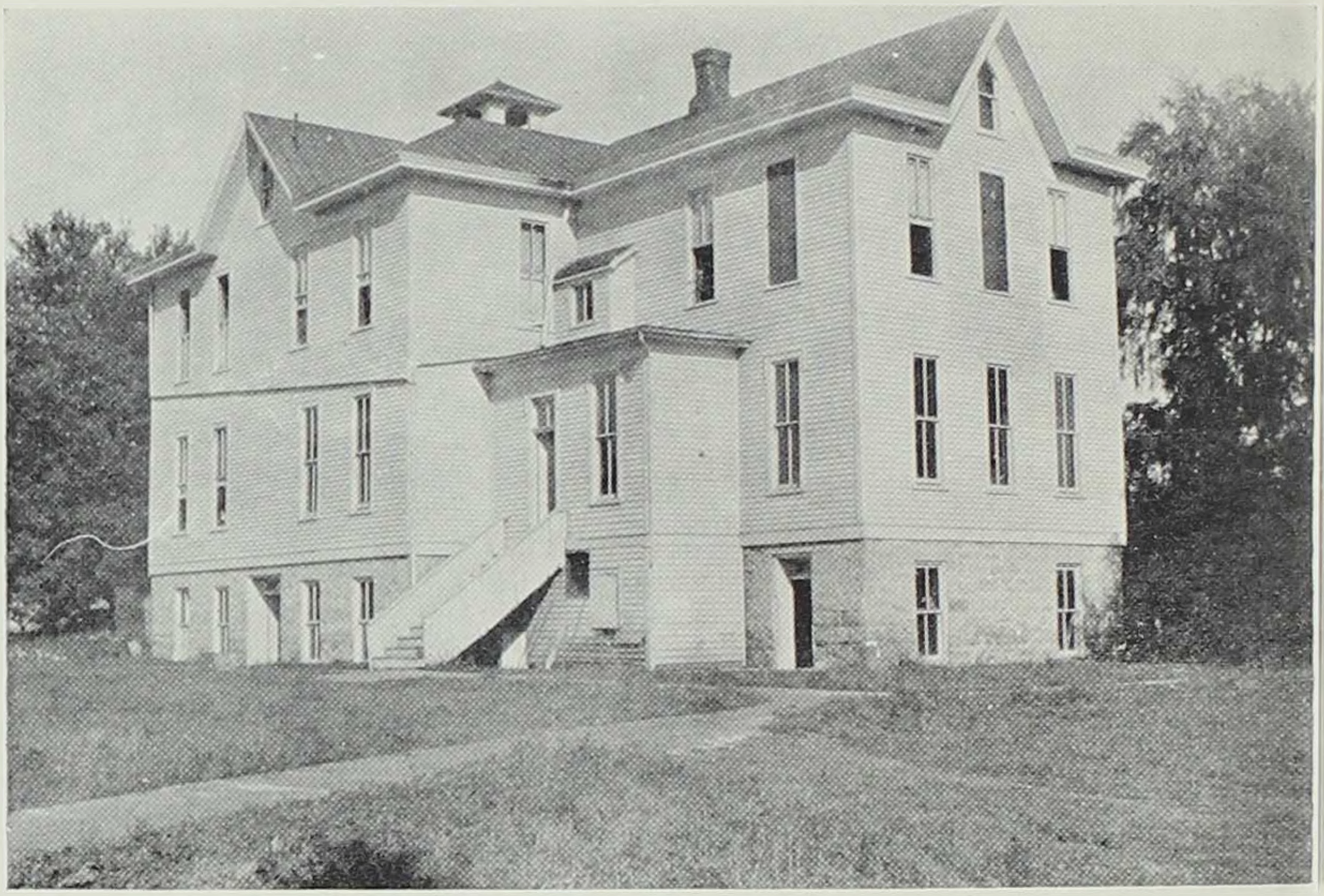
Diploma

has been awarded to **Cynthia H. Embree** as a testimonial of merit and in evidence of her having satisfactorily completed the Course of Studies prescribed for this Institution:

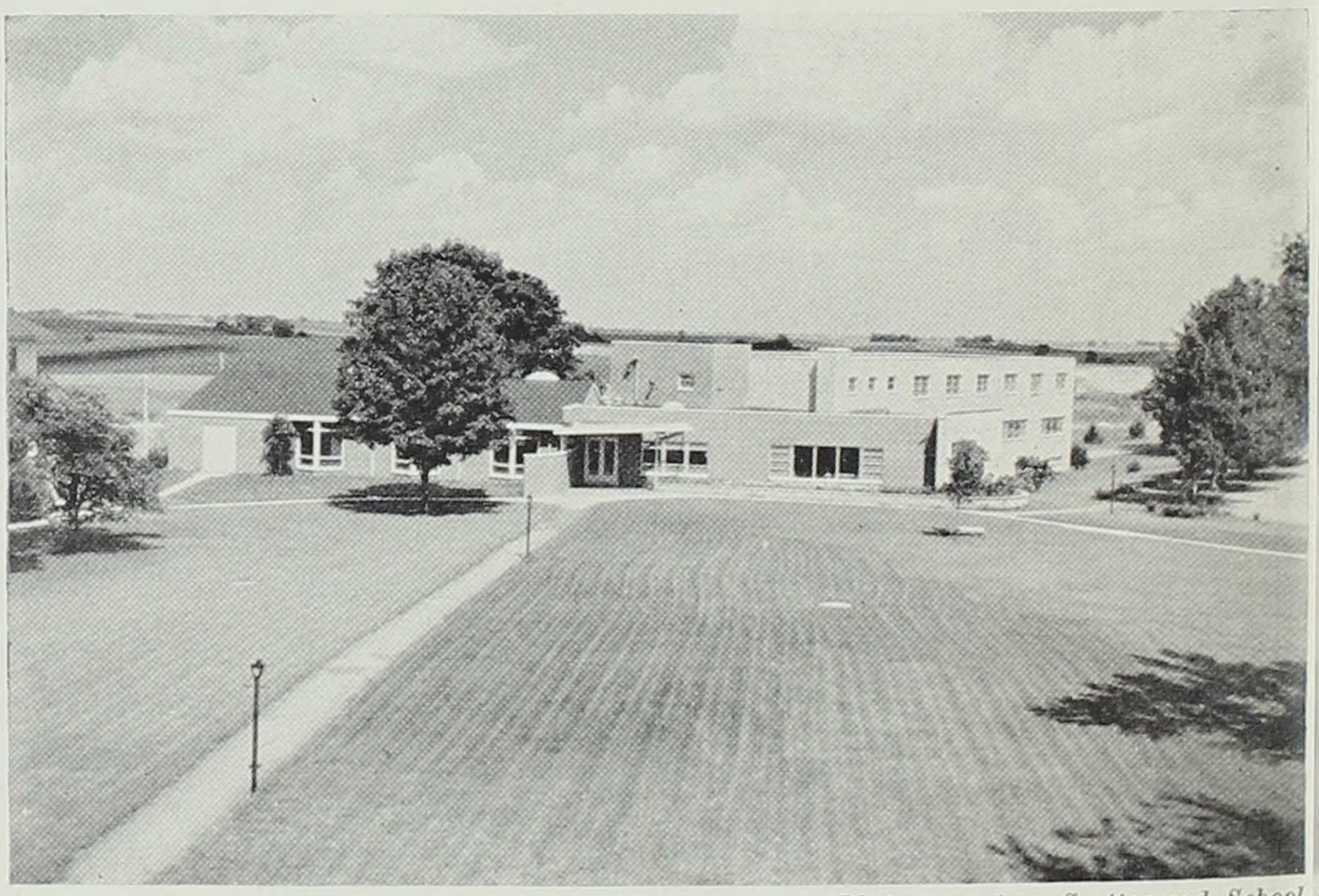
Given at Scattergood Seminary, Conterdale, Iowa, on this the fifteenth day of the third month in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ninety four

Richard Mott
Sarah W. Mott
Edith T. Heald
Superintendents

Lindley M. Osborne
William C. Osborne
Teachers



Scattergood Seminary (before 1930)



Photos courtesy Scattergood School

Scattergood School in 1962

both Father and Mother were too deeply rooted in the old Quakerism ever to find their way even to an appreciation, much less to any practice, in those fields. Some of their children, however, did better; and that was doubtless what had been in their minds.

But in literature the breaking of the old bonds was nothing less than emancipation. Father and Mother had first met at the Friends' Boarding School at Barnesville, Ohio; and part of their courtship consisted of reading together a single-volume edition of Shakespeare's plays which they had smuggled into the school despite warnings against the licentiousness of stage-plays that stemmed directly from old George Fox himself. Of course, Quaker homes were not without books. Besides the Bible, most of them had the *Friends' Library,* which consisted of several large volumes containing the religious experiences and testimonies of early Quakers: to me they were inexpressibly dull. Grandfather also had *Paradise Lost,* and Grandmother had Whittier's poems. They took the local weekly newspaper, and even, during one presidential campaign, they allowed themselves the unusual indulgence of subscribing for the Chicago *Inter Ocean,* much of which Grandfather read aloud to us. And of course they received the *Friend* paper, from Philadelphia, sometimes called "the square *Friend*" because of the shape of its pages. But now Father and Mother were no long-

er limited to such meager fare and began to accumulate a small but choice collection of general literature, of which I shall write later.

There was another kind of liberation which my parents experienced when they left the Society of Friends. Friends had a testimony against the worldly vanity of changing fashions, so the men still shaved clean, as men did in Fox's time; and all still wore raiment of the same cut and style that the common people had worn at that time — and always in conservative grays, browns, and black. Now Father could — and did — raise a luxuriant red beard, and he could — and did — wear a cutaway coat decorated with lapels when he went to work on his newspaper. Mother could wear a spring hat adorned with flowers to church and W.C.T.U. meetings.

And one other thing: we were no longer required to use what Friends called "the plain language." When the Society was founded in England in the mid-seventeenth century, the use of the titles "Mister," "Mistress," and "Miss," and the plural "you" for "thou" or "thee," were all marks of flattery and obsequiousness, tending to set certain classes above others, whereas all were equal in the sight of God. Hence the continuing testimony of Friends against the use of "Mr." and "Mrs.," the singular "you," and so on. Also, since many of the usual names for the days of the week and the months of the year were of heathen origin

(as Thursday for Thor, January for Janus), Friends discarded all such pagan practice for mere numbers; Thursday, for example, became Fifth Day and January, First Month.

But speech habits are not as easy to put off as straight-collared coats; and the Motts, newly moved to the town of What Cheer, had some trouble doffing their "thee's." Father explained to my brother and me that we should soon be starting to school, and the other children would think we were queer if we said "thee" instead of "you." So we made a game of it; and if one of us accidentally dropped a "thee," the other pointed a finger at him and shrilled, "Thee - thee - thee - thee!" Thus by dint of much correction and cajolery we learned to conform. But not so Mother. She was willing to say "you" outside the home, but to the day of her death she always addressed members of her family by the more tender and familiar "thee." If she had ever said "you" to me, it would have sounded in my ears like a curse.

"Thou" was almost unknown among Midwestern Friends, except in quotations from the Scripture; and when Eastern Friends sometimes used it, it seemed an affectation. "Thee" was both nominative and accusative.

And now, as I write these lines in 1961, the Wilbur Friends have disappeared over the edge into oblivion. The Hickory Grove Meeting was "laid down" many years ago; but the last I knew a

few descendants of the old Wilbur Friends were meeting on First Days with a few descendants of the Conservative Friends (who, in spite of their name, had been less conservative than the Wilburites) in the little Meeting house in the village of West Branch, using only the "women's part," since there were so few of even the combined congregation. As Grandfather used to drive us to the Hickory Grove Meeting on those First Days I have been telling about, we would pass Conservative Friends from a few miles farther east driving the other way to their West Branch Meeting. Now those of both sects who are left sit in silence together.

Such unions have occurred in Ohio, too, where the Wilburites were once so strong. Indeed, the latest directory does not separate the two sects, and estimates that there are left in the whole of the United States only some two thousand of the combined communion.

Happily, the old dull controversies are lost in the deepening mists of the past; and the Wilburites, the Gurneyites, the Hicksites, the Conservatives, the Progressives, and the rest tend to make common cause for the peace of the world, the relief of economic and social tensions on various fronts, and a satisfying religious life. An active agency in the new integration was the American Friends Service Committee, operating from the city of "Brotherly Love" founded by Quaker William

Penn. The modest but highly effective work of this organization, performed mainly in the aftermath of wars to which Friends continue to register their "conscientious objection," has done more than anything else to bring together the dissident groups of the general Quaker persuasion.

For myself, I must confess that in my latter life I have experienced a feeling or loss in the lapse of my relations with Friends and Friendly attitudes, especially since I have grown to believe that the responsibilities and stresses of our complex life call more than ever for occasional retirement into contemplation. And so I find myself now and again laying down a book or periodical, or sitting back in my office chair, to draw the curtains of tranquillity about me for a little time. Not to daydream, not to worry about duties neglected or tasks imperfectly performed, not to pray in any formal sense — but to meditate for a few moments, by an act of will, upon things removed from the immediate maelstrom, such as an unreasoning faith in the eventual value of good works, or the calming conviction that, despite threats of bombs, the philosophies of the existentialists, and all the wildness about us, I can find in myself a private security in dedication to such things as I hold in highest regard. All this is perhaps a vestigial remnant of the Quaker quietism to which I was born.

And I am increasingly unwilling to take refuge in the alibi that I have no time for such periods of

reflection, for I have a firm personal philosophy that any man has Time Enough for what he wants most to do. Is it not possible that the tremendous wave of leisure that is breaking upon us in America today may afford some hours for profound personal thinking, apart from all pressures? Cannot intelligent persons form a pattern of living in which they may include the Friendly concept of occasional hours — or at least moments — of still contemplation, retiring for a little while into "the eldest of things, language of old Night, primitive discourse"?

FRANK LUTHER MOTT