

New Adventures

Agnes Samuelson was familiar with every facet of public school administration and teaching when she became State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Iowa in 1927. Her assignment now was the general supervision of the public schools of the state, other than those under the authority of the State Board of Education and the Board in Control of State Institutions.

She was the friend of school officials, teachers, parents and children, all of whom realized that this gentle but determined woman had but one goal: To give the best possible educational opportunities to every child, regardless of racial, religious or economic background, and to raise the status of the teaching profession.

Governors, legislators, research experts, community leaders and citizens from all walks of life were among those who cooperated with her during the years 1927 to 1938. During that period she served three administrations in the State House — two Republican and one Democratic. For her third term she was elected without opposition when the Democratic party placed no name on their ballot for the office of state superintendent. During these exciting years she saw vast changes in the

public school curriculum as well as improved teacher certification, progress in vocational and adult education and aids to the handicapped. During her administration, the Junior College was established in Iowa and great advances were made by the government and general public of the importance of the teacher and school in every community.

Highlight of these years was her election as president of the National Education Association in 1935 in Denver when she challenged her enthusiastic followers to "see to it that Education, like Ignorance in Pilgrim's Progress, does not come 'hobbling after' everything else" and that the cry must be to "sharpen our purposes, lop off the petty things around the fringe, and become more articulate spokesmen for education in recovery and reconstruction programs."

As president of the N. E. A., she followed her dedicated policy of preaching the gospel of Grade A education in every state in the union. She also represented the national organization at the conference of the World Federation of Education Associations in Oxford, England.

To that august body she brought this greeting from the National Education Association:

Teacups have made neighbors out of strangers. While we differ in tradition and language, and our governments' relation to education, we are alike in the purpose which draws us together — our desire for a better understanding

among nations, and our belief in education as a means to this end. It takes time to build a substantial foundation for enduring peace, but the important thing is to move in the right direction. The N. E. A. joins hands with all of you in interpreting the necessity and meaning of world friendliness to the present generation, to the end that peace may prevail and human progress be achieved.

Climaxing her trip to Oxford was a flight to Sweden, the homeland of her grandparents. She points out the difference between the swift, comfortable plane ride and the journey of her forebears to America:

It is well to remind ourselves of the courage of our intrepid predecessors, who pulled up stakes and endured the hardships of rugged ocean voyages, exhausting cross-country travel in lumbering covered wagons to settle in America. The Bible was always carried with them as they sought a new life as strangers in a strange land. Their appreciation and adherence to the vital values of home, education, religion and freedom helped to strengthen the sinews of free government and enhance the civilization we love to call Iowa.

A tireless missionary in her field, Agnes Samuelson wrote prodigiously in scores of publications of national and international circulation. She lectured at educational conventions, club meetings, Parent-Teacher, patriotic, religious and farmers' gatherings.

An outstanding event in this period was the Citizens' Conference on Education, called in 1934

in Des Moines and attended by representatives of 31 organizations and many private citizens concerned with educational planning for Iowa. Members of the legislature, state officials and others vitally interested in school problems participated in the program.

A result of this conference was the organization of the Iowa Council for Better Education. Its founders were Frank Miles, editor of the *Iowa Legionnaire*; Charles F. Pye, executive secretary of the Iowa State Teachers Association, and Agnes Samuelson, Superintendent of Public Instruction. The council celebrated its 25th anniversary in June, 1962.

It consists of organizations interested in education. Each group has its own educational program. The I. C. B. E. at its five meetings each year identifies and interprets educational problems and programs, distributes helpful materials and hears talks and discussions relating to education. Information is disseminated regarding issues and new trends. Recommendations of the State Board of Public Instruction and the State Board of Regents are explained.

In a talk to a convention of the Iowa State Teachers Association, early in her new post, Miss Samuelson outlined some of her objectives. They included: Equal educational opportunities for all children of the state; a fully qualified teacher in every classroom; an attractive, sanitary and whole-

some school building and environment for every child; courses of study adapted to the needs of children in accordance with the objectives of education; thorough instruction in the fundamental tools of learning; a persistent program of complete health service, including mental hygiene and pre-school opportunity; a program of guidance and character education to assist children in intelligently choosing careers and achieving significant lives; uniform practice in child and financial accounting; a continuous evaluation of the efficiency of instruction and of the economy of operation of every school district; educational facilities to assist adults in adjusting to changing social and economic conditions and to eradicate all illiteracy in the state. She also recommended a public relations program.

During her term of office many changes affecting Iowa schools were made. Besides improvements in teacher certification, there were changes in tuition laws for non-resident pupils. Statutes relative to the closing of schools with small attendance were altered so that adjoining districts might contact each other for elementary school facilities.

Miss Samuelson's administration was distinguished by two surveys which did much to equalize educational opportunities for children and to improve teacher certification requirements. One survey concerned children with handicaps which prevented them from attending elementary or sec-

ondary schools. After a survey which identified these children, the Iowa legislature appropriated funds to help local school districts bring the children to school or provide home teaching for them.

Extensive information also was collected in a survey of the state's teaching personnel which laid the groundwork for better certification requirements. The taking of a school census biennially was authorized and the use of a uniform system of financial records among all school districts was established. The teaching of Iowa history was added to the list of required subjects in Iowa schools, and money was assured for the support of school libraries.

Agnes Samuelson's administration survived the period of financial depression, during which time teachers' and college faculties' salaries were reduced and many school positions eliminated. Her department administered the Federal Emergency Relief Program for Education in Iowa, when work relief was provided in the fields of adult and vocational education; rehabilitation, and the establishment of emergency nursery schools. During this time she conferred with President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt at Warm Springs, Georgia, regarding the program.

As always, Miss Samuelson had the rural schools in mind. Emphasis was focused on rural education by establishing rural school choirs; special awards for superior rural schools; Iowa letters

awarded for scholarship, and high school tuition certificates given. Important research was carried on in school financing, and a uniform financial system organized. Publications were issued outlining facts for legislators and others. New plans were made for classifying and approving schools and new curriculum materials were developed.

In Superintendent Samuelson's final biennial report in 1938, she recommended increase of minimum requirements for entering the teaching profession in Iowa; establishment of a sound statewide teacher retirement and annuity plan; the meeting in full by the state of its financial obligation to school districts; creation of a school fund in sufficient amount to assume a significant portion of the cost of operating the elementary and secondary schools; expansion of a statewide plan for the education of handicapped children; clarification of the definition of school funds; increase in the resources of the Department of Public Instruction; provision for strengthening the office of County Superintendent; investigation of the possibilities for school district reorganization; appointment of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and closer coordination between vocational and other instruction.

Much progress has been made in all of these areas since this report was presented, but Miss Samuelson is convinced that one problem is yet to be resolved — the continued heavy reliance of

schools upon property taxes. "Giant strides should take the place of snail's pace in this field," she advises. She points out that many districts have had to undergo excessive burdens to meet changing conditions and increasing enrollments.

In 1938 some type of vocational education was offered in 187 different Iowa communities. This program included instruction in agriculture, home-making, trade and industrial education and adult classes. Vocational education, organized under the provisions of federal and state education acts, is of less than college grade, and is given for the specific purpose of equipping boys and girls and men and women for useful and effective employment.

Also significant during Miss Samuelson's terms of office was vocational rehabilitation which assisted disabled persons to become self-supporting. In 1938, 5,272 persons participated in this program.

The census of the teaching personnel of Iowa was the outstanding project of the Board of Educational Examiners. This activity served as the basis for legislation relating to teacher certification.

About one-third of Miss Samuelson's time was devoted to ex-officio duties. She was president of the Board of Educational Examiners and of the Board for Vocational Education and Rehabilitation. She also served as a member of the State Library Commission and of the State Historical,

Memorial and Art Department of Iowa located at Des Moines.

Of her State Office Miss Samuelson recalls:

The work of the chief state school officer is no game of paper dolls or marbles. There was no magic wand to produce whatever history can chronicle, and no rabbits to be pulled from hats to astonish the onlookers. The task was hard work, long hours, overwhelming details, official duties, criticism, impossible demands and all the distractions incumbent upon public service.

Many happy memories offset the drawbacks. They are remembered as the thrills of developing programs, starting new services which continue to flourish, working with people in promoting a greater state through education, seeking improved educational advantages for Iowa's children and adults and feeling at home in every county in the state.

When she was presented with a life membership in the National Educational Association in 1936, Dr. J. W. Crabtree, secretary-emeritus of the organization, called her "a patient, wise, skillful teacher, a devotee of learning, loyal to the interests of the teaching profession, friend of youth and mankind." He expressed the "grateful appreciation of 5,000 life members and 200,000 active members of the N. E. A."

Teacher, philosopher and keen business woman — small wonder Agnes Samuelson was recruited in 1939 by the Iowa State Teachers Association (now the Iowa State Education Association) to serve as executive secretary. Her attention now

turned particularly to the upbuilding of the teaching profession, the strengthening of the organization and the encouragement of greater concern for education among the Iowa citizenry.

Immediate problems concerned reconstruction programs to offset the effects of war, depression and inflation. Priority need was for funds. Association dues were raised. Longtime plans for improvement of Iowa schools were made, and in 1940 a Six-Point Program for school advancement was adopted and promoted through bulletins, radio programs, newspaper publicity and community discussions.

The Fifty-first General Assembly passed bills in five of the six areas of this significant program. Great public interest was evidenced in the School Code program and thousands of printed leaflets were prepared and distributed to organizations and individuals. Again radio announcements, newspaper stories and articles in *Midland Schools*, the Journal of the association, spread the belief in the need for better educational opportunities and for the advancement of the teaching profession in Iowa.

Midland Schools also focused attention upon war activities, legislation, research, classroom helps and "The Blueprint for the Future," a plan which set forth areas of service necessary to building a better organization. Included among the association's successful projects was the purchase,

later, of Salisbury house in Des Moines, as headquarters for the I. S. E. A.

World War II took many teachers from Iowa schools. The state contributed 3500 teachers to the armed forces; 6800 left the teaching field for industry. Emergency certificates were issued to solve, in some measure, the current problem. Many teachers did not resume school careers after the war. Again the urgency for advancing the status and standards of the profession was evident.

Miss Samuelson served on a number of committees during the war period. She aided in the sale of bonds and stamps and represented the association at many patriotic conferences. Through voluntary subscriptions, Iowa teachers purchased and equipped two ambulances, and for this service received a citation from the U. S. Treasury Department. All participated in programs of rationing, civil defense, victory gardens and physical fitness. They contributed generously to war related programs, and bought bonds and stamps.

The activity of the Iowa State Teachers Association continued untiringly as Miss Samuelson moved on to Washington, D. C., where, from 1945 until her retirement in 1952, she was a staff member of the National Education Association which she had previously served as president. In her new post, she was assistant editor of the N. E. A. Journal and associate director of American Education Week. She pioneered with others

in the establishment of the N. E. A. Division of Rural Service, an area which has exerted dynamic leadership in the improvement of rural education over the country during the past 25 years.

Many years had passed since the ambitious Shenandoah school girl overcame difficult obstacles to secure a college education amidst many and varied teaching positions. Among showers of congratulations on her new position came this letter from one of her University of Iowa professors, the late Forest C. Ensign:

I'll say the little girl whom I knew as a country teacher in Page County has traveled some distance. I wish even one percent of my students of these past years might have had the talent and opportunity to render the service to education which you have already done. Our schools and our educational ideals would be much farther along, were this the case.

But it is especially gratifying to me to look back over the years and realize that I, at least, had the opportunity to watch your progress, to cheer you along the way, and perhaps to afford a little inspiration, as you have risen, step by step, apparently quite unconscious that you really were rising.

Miss Samuelson's duties as assistant editor of the Journal were directed toward pages devoted to the state associations, articles relating to the Parent-Teacher Association field and the activities of American Education Week.

American Education Week is observed nation-

ally during the week which includes Veterans' Day. It is sponsored by the National Education Association; the National Congress of Parents and Teachers; the American Legion and the United States Office of Education.

Its annual observance emphasizes the principle that the education of the people is the government's continued obligation to its security and perpetuity. Its initial purpose to improve health conditions and eradicate illiteracy was established as the result of defects noted in soldiers during World War II. The purposes have broadened to include current needs and conditions, with the continuing theme, "Bring the people to the schools and the schools to the people."

One of Miss Samuelson's important tasks was to work with schools and organizations in developing this observance over the United States. Her activities included planning and attending meetings, preparing posters, radio scripts and other helps for the groups in charge. They, in turn, issued booklets, planned parades, exhibits and other demonstrations to promote better education. Particularly popular were many of the colored posters originated by Miss Samuelson.

So significant and impressive were many of these materials that they are being requested by overseas educators in Canada, Ceylon, India, Israel, Guam, Liberia, Malta and the Philippines.

Among Miss Samuelson's many interests during

this era was participation in rehabilitation programs to aid needy teachers and schools overseas. She worked with the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, cooperating with the American Junior Red Cross, in sending boxes of supplies to destitute schools and homes abroad. As a member of Pi Lambda Theta, honorary society for women in education, she was its Washington chairman for the collection of educational books for a Teachers College for Women in the Philippines. Cooperating in this project was the Emergency Library Service of the Congressional Library.

A real thrill for the Iowa educator was the Lord and Taylor Awards luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, during the closing year of her service on the N. E. A. staff. She accepted, on behalf of the association, a tribute to the teachers of America for their work in teaching human relations to children.

This program was broadcast over radio networks and was carried internationally on the Voice of America. The participants also took part in a broadcast before the luncheon, and Miss Samuelson appeared on television to report the awards.

Her Swedish ancestry is cherished by Agnes Samuelson and her joy was great when in 1950 she received the annual award from the Women's Auxiliary of the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia, given to "the women of

Swedish-American heritage for outstanding accomplishments and helpful service to others."

During her stay in Washington, D. C., Miss Samuelson represented the president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers at many conferences and conventions. She also served that organization as chairman of education and wrote articles for its publication, the *National Parent-Teacher*. She has been honored with life memberships in the national and Iowa P. T. A. groups.

As a member of the visual aids committee of the N. E. A., she aided in the supervision of the production of educational films. Busy though she was with official duties, she also had time for church work, teaching an adult class in the Augustana Church and receiving a Bible as a farewell gift from her church group when she left for Iowa.

A delightful surprise awaited the educator when she attended the N. E. A. convention in Detroit in 1952. She was called to the platform by Wesley Erbe, president of the Iowa State Education Association, and presented with a gift, "in recognition of her service to the teaching profession in Iowa and the nation." Many tributes were paid to her upon her retirement — "retired," — she reminded her Des Moines friends, "but not tired."

She says, "I look upon the years ahead not as 'retirement from' but as 'adjustment to' another period of living."

DOROTHY ASHBY POWNALL