

A Rural Literary Society

"Will you go to Literary with me a-Friday night? If so, please let me know by a-Tuesday night."

This was the exact wording of a note which a member of my family received from an admirer in the days before the telephone jingled in every Iowa farmhouse. And while others in the family teased her about the suitor and the homely phrasing of his note, nobody laughed at the idea of taking a girl to a "Literary" to show her a good time. That was quite as it should be; in fact, such an occasion was a suitor's golden opportunity. Places to go, besides church, of course, were relatively few.

The literary society, deriving from the movement for adult education which spread westward from New England, nourished the intellectual life of rural neighborhoods. It may be argued that its function was largely social, "shared experience" being the really significant factor in any community enterprise. And in our day of specialists it may be doubted whether these young farmers without the guidance of an expert really accomplished anything worth while. Certainly there is

everything to be said in favor of trained leadership; but in an isolated community leadership must generate itself. Before easy communication with the towns was established the young people seeking intellectual stimulus used such means as were at hand; and the literary society, crude as its offerings were, fostered that individualism which stamps life in remote places and which passes as soon as urban influence begins to overshadow rural life.

Such a literary society flourished for a few years during the early nineties in the Verdi neighborhood in Washington County. Verdi, a station on the Rock Island Railroad, was little more than a depot and a general store, although it happened to be the site of the school in the so-called Walnut District. It was in the schoolhouse that the literary society met on Friday evenings during the winter, its meetings open to the public which gave it enthusiastic support. On fine nights when the roads were good the kerosene lamps shone out over a whole roomful of faces, and the flattering attendance threw the performers into a state of mild excitement.

It was understood that the debate would be the principal feature of the program — the society was orthodox in that its *raison d'être* was the cultivation of forensic ability — but the committee in

charge comprehended program building well. Lighter numbers, such as songs and recitations, were put first. Then came the debate, which occupied an hour or more; and the program was concluded by the "newspaper", a spicy collection of jokes and local hits, calculated to send the audience home in good humor.

Of the singing I have little report. I believe there was no organ in the schoolhouse, and I suspect it was difficult to find people who read notes really well enough to make good harmony. I imagine that the favorite songs were inherited from the singing schools of the previous decade. Doubtless a quartet sang "Don't Leave the Farm, Boys", a typical didactic composition of the C. E. Leslie school. Surely the best soprano of the group was persuaded to offer the stirring temperance solo, "Don't Go Out Tonight, My Darling."

But the speaking — ah, there were budding elocutionists in those days, and there were stirring pieces to speak. They were not called readings — that term did not come into vogue until some years later when aspiring young ladies came home from the Academy at Washington prepared to recite such blank verse as N. P. Willis's "Absalom":

The waters slept. Night's silvery veil hung low
O'er Jordan's bosom, and the eddies curled
Their glassy wings beneath it.

No, these were "declamations", pure and simple: "Kentucky Belle", "Curfew Must not Ring Tonight" from Barnes's *Fifth Reader*, and a poem entitled "Whistling in Heaven". The preference was for poetry of a dramatic type. A few verses from the last named piece will give the flavor of it.

You may ask me why I should say so,
But wait till the reason I've given
When I say I shan't care for the music
Unless there is whistling in heaven.

Then follows the story of a young pioneer wife whose husband is obliged to leave her alone in their wilderness home while he journeys to a distant trading post for supplies. The woman is desperately afraid of Indians, and to her excited imagination every sound of the forest is alive with portent. She is naturally terrified when she hears not far away

a persistent dull thump
As if someone were heavily striking
An axe in the top of a stump.

But her fears are dispelled when she hears the next moment a clear, musical whistle, and remembers with joy

That the red man ne'er whistles at all.

A few moments later there appears in the clearing the form of a boy, a stranger from a homestead

some miles away. His cheery greeting restores the pioneer wife's morale, and out of this experience grows the conviction that there must be "Whistling in Heaven".

I have been surprised to learn from those who took part in them that the debates were wholly impromptu. During a short recess which followed the singing and speaking the affirmative and negative leaders, appointed by the president of the society, selected a question and chose their colleagues, usually two each. Then the gavel fell, the house was called to order, and the meeting took on a parliamentary air. The affirmative leader opened the debate, followed by the negative leader; then the colleagues spoke in order; and the affirmative leader closed the debate, the negative being allowed no rebuttal. No time limit was imposed on any of the speeches except the concluding one, and since the audience was invited to join in informal discussion after the appointed speakers had finished, the debate was often long. This open forum, however, was one of the significant aspects, since it drew into the argument some of the older people present.

One of the keenly appreciative listeners was Simon Peter Keefer, an old gentleman of dignified and excellent address. The chairman never failed in the courtesy of calling on him, and Mr.

Keefer never failed to begin thus modestly: "I don't know *why* I should have been called upon to *speak* upon the question which has just been discussed, *and* ably, *but*, since I have been called upon, I will respond." And in this same stately rhythm and in eloquent phrase he would open a spirited defense of war — there were no pacifists among those old country men to whom the Civil War had become a glorified memory — upholding the affirmative of the question, Resolved: That intemperance causes more misery than war.

This question was typical of the ones debated. Others in its class were: Resolved: That fire is more destructive than water; that the works of nature are more beautiful than the works of art; that the fear of punishment is a greater incentive than the hope of reward; that Washington was a greater man than Lincoln. A more timely question was that of the income tax, not yet an accomplished fact, and most popular of all was the question of free and unlimited coinage of silver. From afar one heard the thunder of William Jennings Bryan, and the silver tongued orator had many an imitator in constructive argument.

When the fury of the debate had spent itself and the judges had brought in a decision the audience settled back to enjoy the relaxing number of the program — the newspaper. Whether by acci-

dent or design someone in my family preserved a copy of the "Verdi Illuminator", written in the beautiful shaded penmanship of the period on sheets of legal cap. It is dated January 12, 1894, and the first item explains the "terms: 7½ cents a year. 150% off if paid in advance." This facetious beginning set the tone of the paper. The editor goes on to offer club rates, a premium for five new subscriptions being a "copy of Jesse Taylor's latest poems complete, elegantly bound in wrapping paper." There follows a City Directory (of Verdi, of course) with other local young men listed as attorney at law, justice of the peace, and general merchant, the latter advertised as dealing in codfish, farm machinery, musical instruments, and hooks and eyes. Then, as if apprehensive of carrying even inspired nonsense too far, the editor inserts a few platitudinous epigrams: "Temper is a good thing until you lose it"; "A shiftless man loves to talk about his bad luck"; "Make it a rule to look upon the bright side, and you will soon find that there is always a bright side to look upon".

There follows a lengthy news item in high-flown style, recording the adventure of some neighborhood "fair maids and gallants" at a skating party. After that some well-worn pleasantries such as the news of a fight at the postoffice — the

postmaster licked the stamp. Scattered throughout the paper are the "wise cracks" of the period: A mistress tells the maid to give the tramp the water in which the eggs were boiled — "it is very nutritious"; and a shoemaker hangs out a sign reading, "Don't go elsewhere to be cheated; walk in here." But by far the greater portion of the paper is occupied with records of local happenings, in which the actors are referred to by initials or in veiled euphemisms, such as "our hero", "the horse trainer and capitalist of Verdi", "the brave girl", or "a miss from one of Verdi's hilltops". Some of these innuendoes are reminiscent of the *Spectator Papers*; indeed, the whole project is somewhat in the tradition of Addison and Steele, although lacking the piquancy of their famous journalese.

Reading it now one is impressed with the mildness of it all, and finds the editor's concluding note somewhat amusing: "We wish to thank those who have contributed to this paper, and hope that no one has been offended at anything that has been said, as every thing has been meant kindly."

KATHERINE BUXBAUM