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Excelsior

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Excelsior

A neglected phase of the cultural life of America is the sudden development and rapid decline of the Swedenborgian, or New Church. This organization, the outgrowth of the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, was first planted in America by James Glen in Philadelphia in 1784. The new interpretation of life caught the imagination of the early nineteenth century. It at that time answered certain definite needs: the relation of religion to the new theories of science, the attitude of organized religion to the economic difficulties of the time, and the ever present problem of institutionalism. Swedenborgianism appealed to New England, engaging the minds of the most thoughtful people. It reached its height when Emerson included Swedenborg as the representative of religion in his *Representative Men*. After 1850, its influence began to decline in New England, but had already taken root in the Old Northwest and had even penetrated Missouri and Iowa.

In 1811 the Reverend Adam Hurdus founded the Swedenborgian Society in Cincinnati. From there missionaries carried the *Writings* throughout the Middle West. Among these the picturesque

figure of John Chapman, better known as "Johnny Appleseed", played a prominent part. In 1839 the Illinois Association was formed, reaching out with "reading groups" to all the region east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio. In 1842 the Reverend T. O. Prescott, sent out by the Cincinnati group, founded the Swedenborgian Church in Saint Louis, believed to be the first Society west of the Mississippi. This influential group attracted many Germans who had already been introduced to Swedenborg through Immanuel Tafel's translation of his *Writings*.

These German pioneers in turn became the founders of the first Swedenborgian colony in Iowa. Unhappy in the state church of the Fatherland, they found a new freedom in the New Church, the result of Swedenborg's revolt against the older institutionalism. Swedenborg became convinced about the year 1745 that the church as then organized had ceased to meet human needs. For this reason he ever after referred to all organized religion outside his own as the Old Church. These same pioneers sought a solution to the economic insecurity which had driven them to America in religious communism. This communal life could flourish in the New Church, whereas the Old Church would have forbidden it as irreligious. It could also flourish on the Iowa prairie.

The New Church colony in Iowa was founded in 1851 and called itself the Jaspis Kolonie (Jasper Colony). The members embraced communism; they accepted the spiritual guidance of the Bible as interpreted by the writings of Swedenborg; and they purposed to keep their mother tongue. The colony acquired about one thousand acres of fertile land in Iowa County during the years 1851 and 1852. Their first settlement of log cabins was at the point where Willow Creek flows into Price Creek, a tributary of the Iowa River. This location later was called Lenox. The investigator can yet dig up bits of broken dishes on the spot where the original log cabins stood.

The first change to come to the colony was the abandonment of communism. Records in the office of the Iowa County recorder show the first transfer of property from the colony to an individual on April 20, 1853. Probably the colony was reorganized just previous to this date. The second change was the building of a school.

Previous to the abandonment of communism, the person, or persons, best qualified taught the children in his or her own log house. The pupils paid for the instruction by a certain sum of money or by produce. The members of the colony all spoke German and hoped it would continue to be the language of their children. In 1855, the Soci-

ety of True Inspiration came to Iowa and established the Amana Colony adjoining the Swedenborgians. They too spoke German and continued it as the language of their children. They too were actuated by religion, but their type of pietism was much more thoroughgoing than was the "Heavenly Doctrine" of the Jasper Colony.

Among the teachers in the "log house", before a regular school was built, the Cox girls held the leading rôle. Caroline and Emily made their home and "kept school" in their one-room cabin. Miss Caroline was the real teacher, but she was "slightly hunch-backed and in poor health". Often she was confined to her bed for an entire day; then Emily taught the school and when information was needed went to the bed of the semi-invalid for it. "The Cox girls" taught during the summer and so had no discipline trouble. Their specialty was the beginners. It is said that no one seemed to know whence "the Cox girls" came or whither they went after leaving Lenox.

In 1858 the Jasper Colony decided they should have a school. The election of a county superintendent of schools that year probably brought the matter of a building to a definite decision. Most of the lumber for the frame building, later to be known as the Excelsior School, came from the Amana sawmill. Some special pieces,

however, were hauled from a sawmill at Iowa City by an ox team. Amana workmen assisted in putting up the building. The workmanship was of a superior order.

This, the first building constructed primarily for use as a schoolhouse in Lenox Township, was built by the Jasper Colony though in no sense for a New Church school. The building, which still stands, is 18 by 24 feet in dimensions. One door facing the south leads into a large entry, typical of early country schools. The entry provided a place for coats, hats, and lunch baskets. Another door leads directly into the school room. At the front a wall space about five feet square painted black served for a blackboard. In front of this was the teacher's desk. Facing the desk were two rows of large and heavy hand-hewn seats for the pupils. Each seat had an equally heavy desk joined to it by means of a board resting on the floor. Later these seats and desks were replaced by "store bought ones". Boys sat on one side of the room, the girls on the other. The building was heated by a stove in the middle of the room. Large chunks of wood were used as fuel.

George C. Burmeister was the first teacher in the new school. He taught one year, 1858-1859. It was his personal motto which gave the name "Excelsior" to the school. The second teacher

was Henry Burmeister, a brother of George. Men were preferred in the early days since discipline, especially in the winter when the older boys attended, was no easy matter. The "three R's" were the only subjects taught. It seems impossible to find the names of all the early teachers, but a few stand out in the minds of the descendants of the pioneers with great gratitude and vividness. Some of these portraits should not be forgotten.

George C. Burmeister, the first teacher, was born in Germany and trained in a Lutheran parochial school. Coming to America at the age of ten with his parents, he early sought to learn to speak English fluently and correctly. After clerking in a store in Illinois, he came to the Lenox community in 1857 although he retained his Lutheranism, regarding the Swedenborgian creed as "fantastic and amusing". He preferred the town to the "backwoods", but when the new school began his interest found new expression. Not only was he engaged to teach the day school, but he also opened a night school for the older members of the community. All the teaching in the day school was in English. The night school, however, was conducted in German. Debating societies were at that time much in vogue and one flourished under his care at the Excelsior School. There the

issues of the day were discussed, among them the question of slavery.

When school closed early in the spring of 1859, Burmeister entered Western College, a United Brethren school on the open prairie of Linn County about fifteen miles from Lenox. Opened in 1857, Western College was moved to Toledo in 1881 and later renamed Leander Clark College in honor of its principal patron. Burmeister studied at Western till 1861 when he enlisted in the northern cause with other students. Three months later he was mustered out. Having decided to become a lawyer, he planned to study law in Muscatine. In 1862 he raised Company C of the Thirty-fifth Iowa Infantry and served as captain. He was mortally wounded during the Red River campaign and died in an army hospital in Saint Louis in June, 1864.

The second teacher, Henry Burmeister, received the position, so the story goes, by a joke. Henry was acting as farm hand for the district school director. One day during the vacation a woman called and asked for the school. Since no man had much faith in a woman's ability to teach, Henry jestingly remarked that he could do a better job than she. The trustee told him that he was hired. Henry thought no more about it till time for school to open. Then, when notified to begin,

he protested. Thinking it over, however, he went to Marengo to be examined.

The examination was oral and the questions easy. Burmeister was asked to demonstrate his ability as a penman and as a reader. A number of well-known dates in history were next asked, and a few simple problems in fractions and percentage followed. After spelling a number of words and giving several rules in grammar, he was asked the chief question of the day: How far is the sun from the earth? Henry replied that he didn't know and furthermore no one else knew either. He then dryly added that the scientists claimed it was ninety-three million miles, but how did they know? They hadn't measured it, had they? Apparently little faith was placed in scientists in Iowa County that year. The county superintendent affirmed Henry's answer and gave him the necessary certificate.

But women did teach. Miss Elzora Wilkins, among the first women teachers, was also the first English-speaking teacher. She came with her family to Lenox soon after the Jasper Colony started and kept school in their log home before the Excelsior School was built. She was held in such high esteem that she was permitted to teach in the new school and seems to have encountered no difficulty in the matter of discipline.

Miss Millie Gamble was another early woman teacher. She had studied at Western College. Her "spelling schools" and "exhibitions" attracted much attention and made her popular. Miss Addie Taylor, a niece of Miss Elzora Wilkins, later taught and successfully carried on the tradition of her aunt. She too made much of "spelling bees" then in fashion, and in this way helped to make education popular and attractive to young and old.

It is rather odd that none of the teachers so far mentioned were from the families of the original founders of the Jasper Colony. In the early seventies, however, Ferdinand Junker, son of William Junker, one of the founders, taught for several years.

All this time the Excelsior School had served a dual capacity, being used on Sundays as the Swedenborgian, or New Church. The first to minister in the schoolhouse was Albert H. Schloeman. He divided his Sundays among three New Church congregations all meeting in schoolhouses: Excelsior, Parker's Grove (near Shellsburg), and a third near Solon. In 1863 the Reverend Gerhard Bussman was called as pastor and continued the same arrangement. The Reverend Stephen Wood, the Reverend J. J. Lehnem, and the Reverend Jacob Kimm all preached in the

Excelsior School in the seventies. Funerals were held in the schoolhouse, and children were baptized and instructed in the faith. There, too, George Burmeister began the first Sunday School, a purely secular enterprise at first, to teach those who desired to read and write German. Late in the seventies this Sunday School was revived with the added purpose of teaching the "Heavenly Doctrines" of Swedenborg.

During the seventies many meetings were held there to plan for the erection of a church. Finally in 1880 the New Church was dedicated and the Excelsior School lost its congregation but not the love of the older members of the colony. Till their death the old pioneers kept their tenderest affection for the old school and, it is said, "sighed for the happy days spent there".

CHARLES ARTHUR HAWLEY