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The District School

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The District School*

When we came to Dayton in 1869, there was no school in our district and no church in the entire settlement. Provision for these was a matter of first concern to the immigrants. However, the division of the township into four-square-mile subdistricts had to await the arrival of sufficient population of school age (five to twenty-one) to justify the maintenance of a school. Our District No. 1 in Grant Township, Boone County, did not reach this population until 1873 and then only by including a number of grownups who had no intention of going to school.

During the years of waiting for a schoolhouse, education was not neglected. Instruction was given in homes and in coöperative activities which were conducted in Swedish. There were no illiterate immigrants, and every child of my age could read, write, and spell in Swedish before he entered school.

The standard pattern for schoolhouses, which was uniform throughout our county, was well adapted for their purpose and provided a comfort-

*This reminiscent story is a sequel to "Pioneering in Iowa" and "The Dayton Swedish Settlement" previously contributed to THE PALIMPSEST by Dean Seashore.

able seating capacity of about forty. The schoolhouses were all painted white. Our schoolhouse and several neighboring ones were built by my father, who was a recognized house builder in that part of the settlement.

Our schoolhouse stood in the center of a well fenced half-acre patch provided with a hitching-post area outside. It was heated by a coal stove, the coal being hauled directly from the mines on the Des Moines River five miles distant at about two dollars a load for hauling and one dollar for the coal. It was the teacher's duty to care for the fire, sweep, and dust; but in these matters the Tom Sawyer stunt usually worked effectively and the building was kept clean and attractive. Drinking water was obtained from a neighboring farmer's well.

The school consisted of two terms: a summer term and a winter term of three months each. The attendance was held down in the summer by the necessity of keeping the older children at work on the farm, and in the winter the young children were often prevented from attending because of inclement weather.

The average salary of the first teachers was about twenty-five dollars a month. When, in the summer of 1885, I became the teacher in this school, I established the practice of devoting one

day to planting in recognition of the need of trees on the prairie. The children brought saplings, shrubs, and flower seeds. Sometimes the parents came along and helped us create a beautiful effect in the yard. This custom was continued for years and was a distinctive feature of District No. 1, before Arbor Day was generally observed.

I was eight years old when the school opened. The first day was an unforgettable event. I was sent with my dinner pail and a primer. With fear and trembling I approached the schoolhouse but, catching a glimpse of the teacher through a slight opening in the door, I immediately took to my heels and ran home. There were no children there, and the sight of the teacher was too much for me. Exactly the same procedure was followed on the second day. Then my mother took a sympathetic hand and arranged for me to go with two neighbor girls, one of them older than I. This time the teacher was ready for us. She received the three of us with open arms, took us on her lap, and kissed us to establish community solidarity. I was indeed glad there was no other boy present to witness the procedure.

We were there to learn English, starting from scratch. We did not understand the teacher and she did not understand us. My work began from a primer loaned me by a moron, who had no use

for it. During that three-months' term, I went through the first, second, and third readers and learned pronunciation so I could read with some facility. But much of the content remained Greek to me. Facility in reading, writing, and spelling was transferred effectively through my training in Swedish. All the pupils in the district were either Swedish or Danish, and so their elementary studies involved learning in two languages.

In the meantime we were acquiring some command of spoken English in the persistent chatter throughout the day. This was individual instruction at its best, and we made surprising progress. In my case this was facilitated because for years the teacher boarded at our house and thus initiated a most effective type of adult education for my parents in which we children also profited greatly. Although my father could neither speak nor write English, when he became the director of the school he encouraged the school board to pass a resolution that only English should be spoken in the schoolhouse and on the school grounds. This was a severe and hard-hearted rule, but during play-time we got some relief by jumping over the fence and playing in Hansen's pasture with freedom of speech in our native tongue.

The first teacher was Maria Balch from Boone. She had only a meager education but entered

whole-heartedly into companionship with us. In those days respect for the teacher was of a high order. We began the day with a prayer for which we had to kneel, and this was followed by the singing of religious songs which we greatly enjoyed. I can still see myself singing lustily:

I want to be an angel,
And with the angels stand.
A crown upon my forehead,
A harp within my hand.

Reading books in arithmetic was most interesting to me because it dealt with numbers and concrete and practical situations so that within a comparatively short time I passed through White's first, intermediate, and advanced arithmetics. This was facilitated by the fact that the teacher did not know fractions and therefore threw us upon our own resources, which showed more wisdom than many a grade-school or high-school teacher shows today.

Two educational principles came out of that work in arithmetic. First, Lawrence Johnson and I, who were constant competitors in leading the school, found that if we committed the rules to memory and worked each example consecutively, we struck no snags in any grade of arithmetic. As we were of about equal ability, the contest was

constant and lively. This realization was a great educational achievement which I have applied countless times while teaching others. The second principle was that we were given the privilege of helping other children who were not so proficient in arithmetic and thereby developed a socialized situation of give and take.

Another teacher was Grover Baker, a splendid young farm boy from Ogden who rode a gentle black pony which he shared generously with me. It was my good luck to have the privilege of sleeping with Grover; and the process of learning English and the wisdom of the world through conversation was carried on deep into the nights, and even as he helped me with the morning and evening chores.

The school attendance rapidly increased from a mere handful the first term to an overflow in the schoolhouse in eight or ten years. The raising of children was the principal industry in District No. 1 and it was both a profitable and happy undertaking. The registration reached its peak of fifty-four, with an average daily attendance of forty, in the winter of 1885. From then the attendance decreased gradually down to twelve in 1917, when the consolidated township school was built. This rise and fall of the district school attendance gives a cross-section glimpse of what happened to

the raising of children in this pioneer settlement during that period.

Until I was sixteen my attendance was somewhat irregular due to strenuous home duties in the absence of my father. After the age of ten, I could not attend the summer school. I find that when I went to the Academy at Gustavus Adolphus College in 1884 and was admitted to an advanced class, I had attended the district school only about 600 days and had never seen a high school but was able to pass an examination enabling me to finish my work at the Academy in two years. The entrance examination was limited to United States history, advanced arithmetic, advanced geography, and advanced grammar, and the type of instruction I had had in the district school proved very effective in facilitating my passing it. I had complete mastery of the textbooks on these subjects, but that was all.

The method of teaching history was typical. The teacher would sit with the book open; the pupils sat with their books closed. The teacher would say, "Lawrence, will you begin?" and Lawrence would recite the lesson verbatim from memory. The entire procedure was a memory test and constituted most excellent training in the art of trusting one's memory. Thus after reading a chapter two or three times, one could recite it.

This was not true for all the children, but here another principle came into operation — the recognition of individual differences. Slow pupils were not blamed for being slow and were not pushed faster than they could go. Each one eventually got something out of the effort.

The school was socialized and operated on a constant competitive basis. In spelling, for example, we stood in a row arranged alphabetically from head to foot and the recitation consisted of spelling down. As soon as the one at the head missed a word, the one who succeeded in spelling it took his place. In that way spelling was highly motivated and made a game. It was regarded as a mark of literacy and going the rounds of neighboring district schools became a sport. Those of us who were proficient would ride our ponies and go from one spelling school to another, the main feat being to spell down the teacher. At that time courtesy required that all teachers present should enter into competition with the pupils. The procedure was standardized, and all the words were taken from McGuffey's speller. In this I developed an original idea which has played an important rôle in my educational procedures. I would first have my sister "hear" me and check all the words I missed in the speller. Then I took it for granted that I knew the unmarked words and so studied

only the marked ones. Then my sister gave me a second "hearing" and double-checked the words I missed. I mastered those and could defy any one in contest as I knew how to spell every word in the speller. The last word I learned was "phthisis".

In 1885, after one year in the Academy, I returned to teach District No. 1 and drew the munificent salary of thirty dollars a month. This was not so bad because I did not have expensive training for the job and had my time free mornings and evenings to work on the farm, which was not only a recreation but a profitable employment.

By this time the schoolhouse was full of children from the ages of five to twenty. I had not heard of the word pedagogy and knew nothing about grades in school organization but was able to pass the examination for a county certificate. Not having any technical preparation for organization of the school I had to use my head and heart. In this, the central idea was to maintain the school as a socialized group and keep each student busy at his natural level of successful achievement, largely through self-help or the friendly aid of a more advanced pupil.

There was little teaching, no lecturing, no classification, no promotions or demotions, but throughout there was competition in progress. I

did not teach the ABC's to six-year-olds because students three or four years older could do it much better and were delighted to have this diversion and render this service. The same principle was applied to each subject and at different levels. If any one wanted to know whether he had worked an example correctly or had mastered an assignment, he could go to some one who was ahead of him and usually glad to help.

There was freedom to move around and talk. It is interesting that when this becomes general it is not any more disturbing than on the playground because each one is on his own job and pays no attention to others. This method of pedagogy proved most fascinating and profitable to me although at that time I did not realize the novelty of it. This procedure, however, had its limitations since instruction was limited to the textbooks, but the mastery of them was thorough. To relieve the poverty of material, the school gave entertainments and raised a fund to purchase an encyclopedia which became a most fascinating source of information to many of the children.

In this type of organization I found no difficulty in handling a school of forty pupils or more in an overcrowded room. Discipline presented no problem; motivation was active all around; no one was trying to make pupils all alike; praise and

blame came in community recognition of achievement or failure in the tasks at hand. The spelling down method of teaching spelling was followed at various group levels and there was no reason why an advanced student should not act as the teacher for a lower group.

Singing was a feature introduced for the enrichment of the social life. Children were prepared to enter the then prominent singing schools in their own and neighboring districts.

During my first year of teaching the State required that hygiene be taught and that a special manual be used. This was supplemented in various ways. The subject was presented in relation to the situations at hand. For example, to teach the hygiene of smoking I wrote a play which was presented at a school picnic in our maple grove. Every family in the district was on hand for a basket lunch and entertainment. The leading character in the play was my cousin, Gilbert Seashore, then about twelve years old, who was required to smoke a cigar and suffered the conventional consequences. In a recent conversation with him, reference was made to this incident, and he said, "Do you know, that was both the first and last cigar I ever smoked, although I have been in politics serving as coroner of Hennepin County in Minnesota for over thirty years."

I cannot help feeling that there is a moral to this story of pioneer life in education. I have never been in sympathy with the carping criticisms of the district schools of those days. I am not sure that we gain much by forcing grading systems and highly technical preparation in pedagogy for country school teachers. The situation has, of course, changed. The people in the district want their children to become citified. Children are not so eager for self-help. Parents are more prone to criticize teachers. Extraordinary progress has been made in providing teaching material which greatly enriches the life of a child. But my experiences as a pupil and as a teacher in District No. 1 have created in me a lasting love for the district schools of that day and a grateful feeling of satisfaction in the privilege of having had a modest hand in the development of the public school education in that community.

CARL E. SEASHORE