

1-1-1932

The First Decade

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Recommended Citation

Wright, D S. "The First Decade." *The Palimpsest* 13 (1932), 17-24.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol13/iss1/4>

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The First Decade

In the inauguration of his work at Cedar Falls, Principal Gilchrist faced appalling difficulties. The institution was at first half dormitory and half school, so that in addition to his administrative duties he must needs be the director of a hostelry. His time was divided between educational endeavor and commissary duties.

To internal complications were added external perplexities. The legislative enactment that created the school was passed by a majority of one in each house, and the friends and the opponents of the enterprise continued in much the same proportions. The large minority that opposed the measure, and predicted the failure of the new educational adventure, afterward talked and worked and prayed that their prophecies might come true. Defeated candidates for faculty positions could see nothing good in their successful rivals, and belittled them without mercy. Even prominent citizens of Cedar Falls, who had planned other uses for the Orphans' Home, withheld encouragement and patronage.

And worst of all the meager legislative appropriation for the first biennial period for the maintenance of the school left it pauperized almost to

helplessness. Furniture made for children had to be utilized by adults. Apparatus there was none, excepting an antiquated and wheezy air-pump and a device for testing the breathing power of a child. There were no maps or charts upon the walls, and no funds available to meet the need.

Corresponding to this lack of suitable apparatus, there was a dearth of books. I hasten to add that the Normal School inherited the alleged library of the "Home" and that Principal Gilchrist generously placed his large and well-selected personal supply of books at the disposal of the school. The inheritance of books from the orphans was a sorry collection of soiled and dog-eared volumes, juvenile in character, and unsuited to the uses of a normal school. To a committee, of which the writer was one, the task was committed of culling from this mass of cheap and microbe-infected volumes such as could be accounted worthy of a place upon the shelves of what was destined to become one of the most useful libraries in the State. A baker's dozen were reclaimed and the remnant shipped to the State Training School for Girls. Among the books retained were Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, a life of Daniel Boone, and *The Dairyman's Daughter*.

At the opening of the first session, such stand-

ard text-books were introduced as were most in vogue at the time. Osgood's Readers and Harvey's Grammar were adopted because both Osgood and Harvey were intimate personal friends of the principal. The Fish-Robinson Arithmetics became the guide to instruction in what was latest and best in number-teaching. From Cornell's Geography and Atlas the students learned to bound the States, to name their capitals, and to trace the courses of the rivers from their sources to the sea. Cutter's *Anatomy, Physiology and Hygiene*, Swinton's *General History*, and Haven's *Mental Philosophy* ranked high in the estimation of the faculty of four.

The principal, a gospel minister and a devout Christian, was imbued with a deep sense of his accountability to God and to the State for the moral influences that should go out into the schools with those who had imbibed the atmosphere of the Normal School. On the first Sabbath afternoon of the initial term, a preaching service was held in the assembly room at which the principal functioned as director and minister. Inasmuch as the students housed in the building were two miles or more from the nearest church and the only way to get there was to walk, this vesper service became a permanent feature of the school and was maintained for a quarter of a century or

more. It was only discontinued when street car service made the downtown churches accessible to the student body.

For these preaching services, ministers of practically all denominations in Cedar Falls and nearby towns gladly rendered their services without money and without price. Near the middle of the opening term, a students' Wednesday evening prayer meeting was instituted, and was maintained with scarcely a break far into the twentieth century. This service received the unqualified support of the principal and all his faculty. It was almost unanimously attended and participated in by the students, a large majority of whom were members of Christian churches and active Christian workers. There is that about the teacher's calling and the responsibilities it involves, more perhaps than in any other profession, which conduces to sensing the need of guidance that is higher than any human help can render. The consecration of the faculty and the ready response of the student body to that which is noblest in life made the State institution at Cedar Falls distinctively a non-denominational yet a religious school.

Upon enrolling, each student was presented with a term program showing the hours of recitation. On the back of this sheet was printed a long list of "Rules" to which the recipient was expected

to conform. The most famous of these requisitions was numbered and known as Rule II — "It is expected that the ladies and gentlemen of the institution shall treat each other with politeness and courteous civilities; but whenever they transcend the proprieties of refined society, they are liable to dismissal. Anything like selection is strictly forbidden. Private walks and rides at any time are not allowed. Students of the two sexes, by the special permission of the Principal, can meet privately for the transaction of business, but for that purpose only."

This, though intended seriously, soon became in the eyes of the students a stupendous joke. "Selection" became a word to conjure with. Its very mention was provocative of a smile. New students were solemnly warned to beware of the criminality of "selection". Notwithstanding the severity of the rule, its promulgation could not quell the mating impulse in the student's heart. Over against the principal's dictum was the decree of Holy Writ, "It is not good for man to be alone", and their own hearts added, "Nor woman either". Will and Fanny took great delight in the study of botany; but it enhanced immensely the pleasure of the pursuit if they could stroll together in search of flowers to analyse; and it is said that they became so enthusiastic in the study

of pollen grains that they both tried to look through the magnifying glass at the same time. Despite the rigidity and severity of the rule, selection among the students was the natural anticipation of matrimony.

When the first class was ready for graduation in June of 1877, Principal Gilchrist, doubtless following the practice he had pursued in his eastern school experiences, inaugurated a system of State examinations to determine the scholastic qualifications of the candidates. The committee of examiners consisted of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Principal of the State Normal School, the President of the State Teachers Association, and two county superintendents chosen respectively by the State Superintendent and the Normal School Principal.

Whatever such a system may have accomplished in the East and South, it proved to be ill-adapted to conditions in Iowa. To the candidates it was a nerve-wracking ordeal, to the examiners a jolly junket and a farce. The latter were a company of kindly disposed mortals, who attributed a failure in recitation to other causes than ignorance and graded the unfortunate reciter accordingly. At the end of a two days' ordeal, each member of every class was duly "passed", except in some unusual cases when the candidate

was "conditioned" but not "failed". Even these were allowed to stand in line on commencement day and receive the diploma with the understanding that they must return it to the principal until the deficiency had been remedied by further study. The system of State examinations was discontinued after Principal Gilchrist left in 1886.

One of the principal's antipathies was the high school graduate. He maintained throughout his administration a stolid prejudice against the city high school. A diploma from one of these had no significance in his eyes. The graduate of the most approved city schools of the State such as Des Moines, Sioux City, and Dubuque, had to submit, alike with the boy from the rural school, to a preliminary examination in the common branches in order to determine his status as a student.

Whatever of justice there may have been in this attitude of the principal toward these aspirants for higher learning, it was naturally resented by the city superintendents and high school principals. Their graduates, seeking preparation to be teachers, were more likely to be directed to some one of the flourishing denominational colleges than to the one institution maintained by the State especially for the training of teachers. One of the first acts of President Seerley was to bid for the patronage of this class of students. A high school diploma

became the passport to the best the institution could afford. The most honored body of students in the school, the ones most sought after by the faculty, the ones who were given uppermost seats at chapel, were known as the High School Graduate Class. This change of policy brought at once to the institution a new type of student.

Only one school building was added to the campus during Gilchrist's administration. It was originally known as South Hall, but after many years it was appropriately rechristened Gilchrist Hall by the State Board of Education.

Principal Gilchrist's greatest work, accomplished in the prime of his manhood, was the laying of the foundation of Iowa's one and only State Normal School. His service may be likened to Aesop's story of a mother fox that chided a lioness for having only one offspring, and of the lioness's reply: "One, but that one a lion".

He laid the foundation and laid it well — the base of a superstructure that was to become the pride of the State, the admiration of other Commonwealths. After ten years of ardent, untiring, and sometimes unappreciated labors, he retired, leaving the indelible imprint of his personality upon the institution.

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