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McGuffey's Second Eclectic Reader

Lisa Van Gaasbeek

University of Akron, Ohio, lmv41@zips.uakron.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Primary Source: Van Antwerp, Bragg & Co. Cincinnati, Ohio, The Plain Dealer, page 5 Wednesday October 25th, 1886. Secondary Source: William E. Smith. William Holmes McGuffey Museum National Historic Landmark at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. MiamiOH.edumcguffeymuseum "William Holmes McGuffey and His Readers." The Museum Gazette: Experience Your America January 1993. National Park Service U.S. Department of Interior Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

McGuffey's Second Eclectic Reader

Lisa M. Van Gaasbeek, *The University of Akron, Museum and Archive Studies*

The artifact that I have chosen to focus on is a revised edition of McGuffey's Second Eclectic Reader. It is a text book dating back to 1879 containing many short lessons with black and white illustrations that are to be viewed while reading. This text book was developed by William Holmes McGuffey, a self-taught man who worked his way up to becoming a professor at several different universities including Miami University of Oxford, Ohio. It was there he was approached in 1835 by a publishing company in Cincinnati to create a series of readers going up to at least grade four. McGuffey was a strong believer of education and morals. It was emphasized greatly in his first four readers until his brother Alexander Hamilton McGuffey took over to finish the fifth and sixth reader books in the 1840s. The text books became a success and were distributed amongst many schools throughout the nation including the school my great grandmother Marie Crowley attended in Dayton, Ohio around the late 1890s. It is believed that the Second Eclectic Reader was given to her for keeps and she used the book throughout the years to teach her own children before becoming a treasured item within the family.

McGuffey Readers are rarely seen today, but they are still known for their history. When William H. McGuffey first began teaching at the age of 14 there were no textbooks for children to read from. In fact many frontier schools, like the one McGuffey began teaching at in Calcutta, Ohio, had the children bring in books from home. Or they were learning first-hand how to read and write. According to one source, "Educating the young mind and preaching the gospel were McGuffey's passions" (William Homes McGuffey and His Readers, *The Museum Gazette*, pg.1).

For many years while teaching McGuffey continued his own education at Old Stone Academy in Darlington, Pennsylvania before graduating from Washington College in 1826 (*The Museum Gazette*, pg. 1). He became a professor of Languages at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. It was there he was approached by the "publishing firm Truman and Smith to create a series of four graded Readers for primary level students" (*The Museum Gazette*, pg. 1). McGuffey worked from his small brick home in Miami Valley. It is even said that he worked at an "octagonal table upon which the Eclectic Readers were designed" (Text from Dr. William Smith of the William Holmes McGuffey House of Oxford

Ohio). McGuffey created the first four, but his brother Alexander McGuffey did much of the work for the fifth and sixth readers.

Many schools were progressing throughout the 1800s and with that came the progression of the text books. McGuffey did have competition with other text book writers such as those by Dr. Joseph Ray and Thomas W. Harvey (Van Antwerp, Bragg & CO, Cincinnati, Ohio). The New England Primer was becoming a big read in America too. But McGuffey's books were "more popular and widely used. Today it is estimated that 120 million copies of the Readers were sold between 1836 and 1960 placing its sales in a category with the Bible and the Webster's Dictionary" (The Museum Gazette, pg. 1).

The Readers were more of a direct approach to education with subtlety in morals. Earlier readers, the first primer to the fourth, would focus on stories or poems involving lessons in manners, while also giving a list of vocabulary words at the top. Some topics would focus on manners at home while others would tell a short story like "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" which can be found in McGuffey's Third Eclectic Reader. Later Readers, mostly in the fifth and sixth, would involve more fluid language and thought within a story or a passage. This was clear in stories like 'The Three Hundred Spartans' by Charlotte M. Yonge, which is found in The McGuffey Fifth Reader or in 'The Broken Heart' by Washington Irving found in McGuffey's Sixth Reader. Because of these different themes and subjects "the McGuffey Readers were among the first textbooks in America that were designed to become progressively more challenging with each volume" (The Museum Gazette, pg. 2).

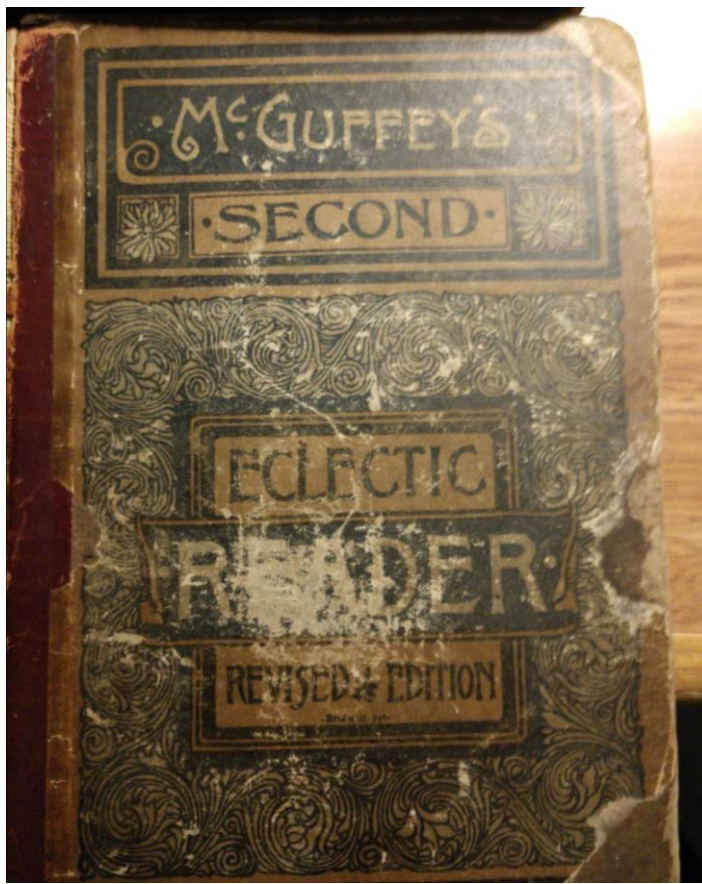
The Readers went up to number six. It could be because most children during that time frame only went up to about grade six before they were sent out into the world. Most had to work for their families or they were sent to work elsewhere and therefore no more time could be spent on education. If that was all the time many had for their education then the "McGuffey Readers were more than just textbooks; they helped frame the country's morals and tastes and shaped the American character" (The Museum Gazette, pg. 2).

The use of the McGuffey Readers was still going on during the late 1800s when my great grandmother Marie Crowley attended Emerson Elementary School on Hickory Street in Dayton, Ohio. However more and more text books were being issued and McGuffey Readers, though being revised to meet the standards of the time period, were being replaced. My family believes that Marie was able to keep her Second Eclectic Reader and throughout the years she used it so that her own children could read and learn from it. The Reader was then passed down for

sentimental reasons in that it was one of the few books that came from my great grandmother's collection. It was not really used after the 1920s, but it did serve as a reminder to what her education involved.

So as of today McGuffey Readers are a thing of the past. But what most don't realize is that "McGuffey Readers were a guide to what was occurring in the public school movement during the 19th century," (The Museum Gazette, pg. 3). The books helped shape how schools could be operated as well as helping children to read and write. Now McGuffey Readers can be found as a rare find in bookshops or online stores and William McGuffey's home in Oxford, Ohio has been turned into a museum where you can even view the octagonal table where he supposedly wrote the first four readers.

The artifact I started with is a Second Eclectic Reader. It is an old worn out book that has been passed down for years. It represents not just a memory of my great grandmother, but also the knowledge that one person was passionate enough about education to spread his views on how people should learn.



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