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Reminiscence of John Muir by Gilmore, E.E.

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E. E. Gilmore
POSTMASTER
Lennox, South Dakota

Tyrone, N.M.
~~Lennox, S. Dak.~~ September 24, 1916 191

Mr William L. Bade,
Berkeley, Calif.

Kind Sir:

Yours of the 14th instant~~y~~ has just reached me, having been forwarded to me from my former home at Lennox, S. Dak., and I am more than willing to furnish any information that I can with regard to one of my former teachers, and especially one that was as interesting a character as John Muir.

A short distance south of Madison, Wisconsin is a small station on the Northwestern Ry. called Oregon.

About three miles due west of this station is a small lake called Lake Harriet covering about a quarter section of land.

A few rods north of the north shore of this lake, and about a half mile west, is an intersection of section lines, sometimes called "four corners", and known locally at the time to which I am about to refer as "McKibbe's Corners".

A short distance east of these "corners" is a small creek running in a southeasterly direction and emptying into Lake Harriet at its western extremity; at the point where this creek crosses the road running east and west it is spanned by a small bridge.

About five or six rods east of this bridge, and on the north side of the road, is where, in 1860 and 1861, stood an old log school-house, in which John Muir taught "the young ideas" during the winter of 1860 and 1861, if my memory serves me right.

1862 | It is hard to recall the exact dimensions of this building, but from memory, I should judge that it must have been in the neighborhood of thirty feet wide by forty feet long with long wooden benches arranged in two tiers on each side, the right hand side for the girls and the left for the boys; the back tier of benches was provided with a long desk fastened against the wall running the full length of the building, and this was used of course by the larger scholars, the smaller ones having to occupy the front tier of benches, "letting their feet hang over".

John Muir at that time was a student in the University at Madison Wisconsin, and through the solicitations of our school board, consented to occupy the position of teacher of our school for that winter, the first and only school that he ever taught, so far as I can ascertain.

With one or two exceptions, he gave excellent satisfaction to both patrons and scholars, and I have always counted that winter as one of the bright spots in my history.

For the first couple of weeks he was obliged to judge of the time by using the sun as a guide as he had no watch, watches being hard to obtain at that time; becoming tired of trying to "guess at the time" during cloudy days, he took a couple of common wooden water-pails, and bored a hole in the bottom of one of them, fitting a small wooden plug with a hole in the center, at the lower part of which was fitted a silver dime with a very tiny hole in the center which was inserted in such a way that the hole in the dime corresponded to the hole in the plug; he then took a common wooden bottomed chair and removed the bottom placing the pail with the plug in, in the place of the chair bottom.

He then fixed a graduating scale on the inside of the side of the pail and filled it about half full of water, and placing the other pail on the floor under this one, let the water drip slowly out of one pail into the other, the lowering of the water on the scale giving him the exact time of day.

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In those days it was customary for school teachers to "board round" that is, they would board a week or two in one place and then board a week or two in another and so on until every patron of the school would have a chance to "board the teacher", which the most of the patrons considered as a high honor; this system took the teacher at times quite a distance from the school-house, and as he had to be there at eight o'clock in the morning in order to have the fire built and the room good and warm, it was at times quite an inconvenience to him.

This being an extremely cold winter, and very heavy, deep snows, Mr Muir became tired of being compelled to reach the school-house so early in the morning, so he constructed a clock, every part of which was wood with the exception of the springs, wooden frame, wooden wheels, wooden pendulum, and even the ball on the end of the pendulum was wood and from this wooden clock, which he fastened to the wall on the inside of the front of the school-house, he had a common string running to the hearth of the stove and fastened in such a way that the clock would jerk the string at a certain time every school morning and start the fire going, which was all arranged the night before, of course, before he left the school-house.

Many, and many is the morning that I have watched the smoke begin to curl up from the school-house chimney promptly at eight o'clock, as we lived only about a mile from the school-house.

About once a week he would give lectures on philosophy with practical demonstrations in the evening which became very popular and people would attend them from miles around, as they were extremely interesting.

At the back end of the school-house, just behind the teachers desk, was a twelve foot blackboard fastened to the wall.

The evening of the last day of school he gave one of his lectures and upon entering the building we were all surprised to see that he had constructed a clock out of large wooden wheels and here was that blackboard, which he had removed from the wall, swinging backwards and forwards, AS A PENDULUM for that clock.

He was a firm believer at that time in perpetual motion, and I distinctly recollect the arguments that him and my father used to have over that question, sometimes spending the whole evening with the "pros and cons".

At the close of the school he returned to the University and the following year I came to Iowa with father and mother and I had lost all track of Mr Muir, and often wondered what had become of him.

During the winter he succeeded in sketching a fine view of the old school-house, doing the work during recesses and noon hours.

In December, 1908 I happened to read an article in one of the leading magazines which was signed "John Muir".

This aroused my curiosity and I wrote the publishers asking ~~me~~ to give me Mr Muir's address, which they kindly did, so I wrote him, calling his attention to a few incidents that occurred during that winter, and I am enclosing his reply to me, and you can imagine with what pleasure I read this letter.

I have received two or three letters from him since, in one of which he requested me to write him at least once a year, which I have done.

The balance of his letters, I am sorry to say, I have been unable to preserve, as I have been moving around a great deal of late.

Will you kindly return this as soon as you are through with it as I would not part with it for any price.

Of all of the pupils that attended that school, I am sorry to say that there is not one whose address I can call to mind; just simply scattered to the four winds.

I have two of his works, "Early Days In Wisconsin", and his trip to Alaska, and am about to send for his "Among The Sierras", and would be pleased to get "A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf", and in fact shall order it just as soon as I see notice of its publication; also I would be pleased to hear from you about what time I can look for your publication, to appear in order that I may procure that also, as I am intensely interested in everything appertaining to his life.

Yours in sincerity, E.E. Gilmore.