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MORGAN H. LOONEY AND HIS GILMER SCHOOL 1861-1871

By Doyal T. Loyd

Morgan Harbin Looney was born in the village of Fairplay, South Carolina, just across the line from Georgia on October 27, 1825. When he was about six years of age his father, Judge Noah Looney, moved with his family to Carnesville, Franklin County, Georgia. At this place Morgan Looney attended select schools taught by Dr. Claud Barton and for a period of five years he was under the tutelage of Professor Cecil Hammond, a Yale instructor. Under this celebrated teacher, he had by the time he was 13 completed Professor Hammond's course in mathematics, arithmetic, algebra, geometry and calculus, and problems in Euclid. He was also versed in Latin and Greek, and he was exceptionally proficient in rhetoric and composition.

Looney took up elocution and oratory in a famous school for boys in Georgia and became a great speaker and lecturer. At the age of 14 he became a teacher and taught for approximately 55 years in five states.

One of Morgan H. Looney's famous pupils was Dr. Young J. Allen who spent 50 years as a missionary in China and was the man who persuaded Dr. Sun Yat Sen, who was the first President of the Republic of China, to become a Christian.

When Dr. Allen returned to America he visited Morgan H. Looney and said to him, "All I am or will ever be in this world I owe to you, professor. I came to your college preparatory school a rich man's son, with a tiny spark of ambition, which you fanned into a bright all-consuming flame." Alexander H. Stephens said, "As an educator Morgan Looney had no equal in the South."

Former Governor of Texas, O. M. Roberts, said of Looney that he was "a teacher of rare ability and original methods and called him the Blackstone of Texas. Were his unique, extemporaneous schoolroom lectures preserved in book form they would constitute a library of great knowledge and probably embrace more wholesome counsel to youth than any book ever yet written."

John H. Magill, a contemporary and friend of Mr. Looney's — a man of discernment and one well in touch with the educational activities of that time, wrote the following concerning him:

"Intellectually Professor Looney was one of the most wonderful men we ever met. His genius was the most versatile. In the vigor of his manhood he was an incomparable orator, as a poet he ranked in imagery, exalted sentiment and delicacy of expression with Father Ryan, the Southern poet-priest. We never knew one with a more retentive mind than his, and as a classical writer he stood without a peer. As a reveler in the classics, he was ever ready with apt quotations upon demand. As an educator his fame rests superbly, and here he was grandly successful. The great good that he accomplished for the rising generations during his long career as a teacher is beyond computation.

By the judgment of the world, Morgan Looney was not a financial success, — he gave more to the world than the world gave to him. He made money, but he lavished it on others. He was impulsively human and intensely humane, and he gave to charity with a prodigal hand. There was nothing of the mercenary about him. In him, with nobility

Mr. Doyal T. Loyd was a resident of Gilmer, Texas. He was Executive Vice-President of the First National Bank at Gilmer, and the author of A History of Upshur County.

of soul was coupled foibles of the genius, and no man was freer to acknowledge his faults than he."

Morgan H. Looney's first wife was Miss Melissa Black of the aristocratic family of Blacks of Georgia, who were famous in the legal and political circles in that state, and to this union was born six children. Morgan H. Looney began his career as a teacher in Parkerton, Georgia, and he continued to teach in various schools in the state until 1860, when he moved to Gilmer, Texas.

Upon his arrival in Gilmer, he bought the old Masonic Institute building in which the local Masonic Lodge had operated a school for several years. The curriculum in his school covered everything from the elementary to the highest grades, including some college subjects. His discipline was rigid and his instruction thorough. His Monday morning lectures to his students were so brilliant that adults who could find time to do so, attended them regularly.

The second cause of the successful operation of the school was Mr. Looney's tactics as a strict disciplinarian. Flappers of those days went elsewhere than to Looney's school to flap. He had a rule governing almost every conceivable human activity, and both students and teachers were required to memorize all rules and review them at frequent intervals. Scanning his rules we find that school began at 8 o'clock in the morning and closed at 6 in the evening, and all students should start to school at a certain time and on arriving at school should pass immediately to their places in the large auditorium. All students were required to attend church and Sunday School every Sunday, no one being excused except for sickness. Swearing, gambling, dancing, drinking and horse racing were forbidden. When the rules were suspended and the young men were allowed to call on the young ladies, the ringing of the school bell warned them when it was time to bid their dates good evening. In fact, supervision of student life extended to the homes and boarding houses of the students and included every detail. Students boarded in the homes of the town, and such a thing as shielding students when they broke the rules was simply unthinkable. There was absolute cooperation on this point. Mr. Looney was a splendid orator, and his lectures on obedience and similar topics had a wholesome effect on the student body.

The work done by the institution was almost of college grade. The number of students ranged from 200 to 300; in 1869 there was 235. The course of study included ancient languages, modern languages, higher mathematics, astronomy, English grammar, arithmetic, algebra, physical sciences, English literature, composition, law, philosophy, bookkeeping and music. The music course, under the direction of Professor Norman, was very popular and included piano, violin, flute, guitar and three instruments.

The Department of Law was, for a time, a distinguishing characteristic of the school. This department was under the direction of Oran M. Roberts, the "Old Alcalde," who was elected Governor of Texas soon after severing his connection with the school. He enjoyed an extensive law practice at Gilmer and his teaching was carried on chiefly as a diversion. When his duties around the court or at his office were not too heavy, he gave an hour a day to his class in school. On Wednesday evenings he delivered public lectures on points of law that were of interest and value to the people of the town.

Few teachers have succeeded in inspiring their pupils or stamping their ideas upon a community as did Professor Looney, and no school in Texas did a greater work during the dark days preceding the public free school than did the Looney School. In 1863 the old school building burned and Mr. Looney took up temporary quarters located near where the Gilmer Ward School now

stands. This building continued to be used until 1866 when a new building was completed on the site where the old building had burned.

The new building was an imposing structure for its day, being a two-story frame house with two stairways on the outside, six large rooms downstairs and a large auditorium upstairs, and four large fireplaces. The building was 60 x 90 feet. Black-boards were painted on the wall. There were two doors on the west side and a partition wall extended from a point between the doors to the platform, which was rather elevated and was located against the eastern wall. The girls filed in at one door and occupied the room on one side of the partition, while the boys came in at the other door and sat on the other side. Mr. Looney sat on his platform at a point which enabled him to see what was going on on both sides of the partition. This arrangement was in keeping with the idea of that day that the success of a school is measured in terms of sex segregation. Measured by this rule, the Looney School was a most successful institution. In the four corners of the large room were smaller rooms for recitations.

One factor which entered largely into the success of the school was the ability of the president to secure competent teachers. Among these were J. L. Cavin, who resigned soon after coming to Gilmer and left for the Army as first lieutenant of Company B., Seventh Texas Cavalry; Miss Achsah Culberson; W. A. Hart, afterwards county attorney of Wood County, and at his death still an honored citizen of Gilmer; Martin Van Buren Looney, a brother of the principal, who married Miss Culberson and died some years later in Atlanta, Texas; Oran M. Roberts, afterwards Governor of Texas, who taught law and bookkeeping for some time in the institution; J. C. Ragan, who taught French and Spanish for several sessions, a gentleman of high scholarship and attractive personality, and J. B. Norman, a teacher of music, who organized in the school one of the best bands in Texas at the time, directed a band through the Civil War, and, returning to Gilmer after the surrender, spent many more years directing the musical talent of the school and community.

If the success of the Looney School is to be measured by the achievements of its students, a high place must be assigned to it among the institutions of its day. Students came from far and near, and many of them afterwards filled places of honor and trust. Among these were Charles A. Culberson, afterwards Attorney General, Governor, and United States Senator; Judge Sawney Robertson, later of the Texas Supreme Court; Judge Sam D. Templeton, Attorney General; George Aldredge, father of a former Mayor Aldredge of Dallas; Jot Gunter, a prominent citizen of San Antonio; L. S. Schluter, afterwards a prominent attorney of Jefferson; Pleas Turner, afterwards District Judge of the Texarkana District; Steven Blount, who became a prominent banker in Nacogdoches; Miss Sallie Stinson, who later became the wife of Governor James S. Hogg; Miss Anna Culberson, who later attended Washington and Lee University and died some years later in Jefferson; and Senator Robert W. Wilson of Arkansas.

Because of Mrs. Looney's health, and at a time when the school was at the zenith of prosperity and prestige, he turned his Gilmer School over to his brother Martin Van Buren Looney in 1871. But without his great leadership the school soon closed.

When he left Gilmer in 1871, he went to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where he established a private school, but when a movement was started to establish a state university there, he supported the project by speaking all over the state

although he knew if a university was established it would kill his school. The school was established and he taught there a short time.

Looney returned to Texas, after his wife's death, teaching at Sulphur Springs, Denton, Weatherford, Jefferson and he returned for a short time to Gilmer in 1876 — but the old order had changed and public schools were taking the place of private schools, so he went back to Georgia.

The Gilmer School was mostly a boarding school — houses were built for students who came here from all over East Texas, even lower grade youngsters. Many of these large two-story boarding houses remaining in Gilmer until modern times.

Morgan H. Looney left Gilmer over one-hundred years ago, but his influence is still felt here. A prominent physician presently in Gilmer is named Looney Fenlaw; the District Judge here is named Looney Lindsey, and there are many other people in the County whose first names are Looney. There is a State Historical marker on the courthouse square in honor of Morgan H. Looney and his school. He was Worshipful Master of the local Masonic Lodge four different times and his picture hangs in the lodge room.

After he returned to Georgia, Looney continued to teach in various places. He published two books of poems, outstanding speeches, and other articles that he had written. He made his home with his daughter, Mrs. Glen Walters, during the last years of his life. He died on June 21, 1901, in Hartwell, Georgia.