



## School Days in Hebron: A Reminiscence of Seventy-Five Years Ago

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## SCHOOL DAYS IN HEBRON

A REMINISCENCE OF SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

By THOMAS P. BEALL

My first memory of school was a little white school-house with green shutters, surrounded by a closely grown sward and nestled in a grove of tall oaks and sycamores, away from the distracting sounds and sights of any highway. It might have offered a fitting subject for some cameraman's skill or even for the painter's art. Situated in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, it admirably served the purpose of forming a number of impressions out of which grew a hopeful, optimistic, almost a sacred regard, for the public school, seemingly so necessary to the perpetuation of the American way of life.

This simple scene, together with one even more fondly cherished—a home in the countryside of the Old Dominion—had to be abandoned to answer what was then the common lure and call of the West. It was in early June 1879, when I was seven years old, that our small family of three

*Thomas P. Beall of Lincoln has been associated with Nebraska education since 1879. Until his retirement in 1948 he served as principal and superintendent in a number of Nebraska towns.*

stepped from the train at the little station of Belvidere on what was then the St. Joseph and Grand Island Railroad. Here I saw our scanty possessions transferred from a railway car to a farm wagon.

We clambered upon the load and set out upon a trail that led across the divide between Sandy Creek and the Little Blue River. We moved with a lumbering slowness over low rounded hills, across grassy swales, and occasionally along the bottom of a shallow ravine, the wagon trail winding its uncertain course until it came quite unexpectedly upon higher ground. From this vantage point the landscape appeared similar to the motionless undulations of the sea. Both near to us and in the distance were herds of cattle either browsing upon the fresh grass of spring or moving in long lines presumably towards one of the small tributaries that found its way into the main stream of this region. Towards the east, rather dim in appearance on the horizon, was a lone habitation, apparently a guide mark for a chance wanderer over the prairie. We looked in vain for some semblance of a little white schoolhouse with green shutters in a grove of trees. Its absence was a keen disappointment to our childish expectations.

The little village of Hebron, named no doubt from the ancient Hebrew city, *Khebron*, lay sprawling in a narrow plain extending from the rounded bluffs that sloped gradually to the valley of the Little Blue. The morning after our arrival we hastened to explore the place. Our guide pointed out the Central Hotel, set back from Main Street, the two-story schoolhouse with its imposing tower in front, and Wetherald Brothers' Mill located on the river a short distance towards the west.

As the summer wore on, our explorations extended beyond the limits of the town. The deep, narrow course of the Little Blue River, with its cool water quietly flowing over a rocky bed, and the inviting shade of the grassy banks, helped to dispel a lonesomeness that hovered around us. The gracefully arched bridge that spanned the stream was always sure, upon the passing of a vehicle, to send

forth a humming sound from its iron-rod supports. We enjoyed standing at the middle section to watch the stream flow beneath; and once brother recited Longfellow's poem, *To The River Charles*. The first and third stanzas are as follows:

River! that in silence windest  
Through meadows bright and free.  
Till at length thy rest thou findest  
In the bosom of the sea!

\* \* \*

Thou hast taught me, Silent River,  
Many a lesson, deep and long;  
Thou hast been a generous giver;  
I can give thee but a song.

Not to be outdone in quoting Longfellow, I recited *The Bridge*, the first and eleventh stanzas of which follow:

I stood on the bridge at midnight,  
As the clocks were striking the hour,  
And the moon rose o'er the city,  
Behind the dark church-tower.

\* \* \*

Yet whenever I cross the river  
On its bridge of wooden piers,  
Like the odor of Brine from the ocean  
Comes the thought of other years.

The Hebron schools opened for the fall term on September 15, 1879. The superintendent, David S. Dusenberry, had held his position since 1877. He was reared on a farm in Illinois and graduated from the National Normal School, Lebanon, Ohio. In 1876 he came to Nebraska and located in Nebraska City where he conducted classes in "normal methods" during the summer. My recollection of Mr. Dusenberry is quite clear. He was of above average height, of a dark complexion, wore a dark-colored suit, the coat being of the cut-away pattern, and his boots were always perfectly polished. His carriage was unassuming but dig-

nified. He was easily approached and exceedingly companionable, as the boys all agreed, for he was a sympathetic listener and counselor.

Miss Josie N. Kieth was our teacher. When I entered her room I still had three months to go before I reached my eighth birthday. There were fifty-three pupils enrolled in Miss Kieth's room that fall. Free textbooks had just been introduced; and I recall how I received with pride a clean new reader and spelling book. I still have copies of several books from my school days: McGuffey's *First Eclectic Reader*, the *Eclectic Spelling Book*, the *Fifth Eclectic Reader*, and *Hillard's Second Reader*. Dr. William Holmes McGuffey (1800-1876), was a teacher, first at Miami University, and later at Ohio University and the University of Virginia. His *Readers* were replete with simple moral lessons and extracts from the best literature. His *Eclectic Series* of readers and spelling books had an immense sale and brought fame and a modest fortune to the author.

My father brought a small library with him from the South. In this collection of books was a *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, a copy of the 1864 edition, the first to be known as the "Unabridged." It was a leather-bound book, much smaller in size than the present *New International*, and contained only 114,000 words, as compared with the 500,000 entries and other material of the modern volume. The growth of this dictionary indicates the tremendous advance in learning during a period of a little less than a century.

During the winter term of the school year, 1879-1880, in the "higher department" of the Hebron schools, instruction was offered in physiology, comparative anatomy, zoology, botany, algebra, higher arithmetic, rhetoric, calisthenics, and music. Social sciences were not included in this curriculum. Extracurricular activities consisted mainly of delivering "orations," reciting "pieces," and "school exhibitions." Some typical oratorical subjects were: "Freedom Takes No Backward Step," "A Man's a Man For a' That." A young lady chose for her oration the theme,

"Would I Vote if I Had a Chance?" She had recently attended a lecture by Susan B. Anthony. "Rome Was Not Built in a Day" was the subject selected by a young orator. The speech elicited praise from the local newspaper, which commented that the discourse must have required "extensive research" in its preparation.

In 1880, on a day in early June, I planned with a companion to make a short trip southward from Hebron. Upon inquiring at the Sherman House for directions, we were told to follow Main Street until we came to the "main travelled road going southward." As we reached the red bridge which spanned the Little Blue we were warned by a large sign over the bridge: \$5 FINE FOR RIDING OR DRIVING FASTER THAN A WALK OVER THIS BRIDGE. A short distance beyond we came upon two guideposts or "fingerboards," one pointing due southward — BELLEVILLE (Kansas)—25 MILES; the other pointing due westward — SUPERIOR (Nebraska) — 33 MILES. Following the "main traveled road" southward in a one-horse buggy for a distance of about seven miles, we came rather unexpectedly upon a little frame schoolhouse situated on our left a few yards from the road. The building had, perhaps at one time a white coat of paint—not at this time—but there were the faded green shutters, a reminder of an earlier time.

Farther to the south we came upon higher ground and observed the beautiful panorama of undulating prairie over which the herds of the farmers and ranchers were leisurely grazing. The dwelling places of the pioneers were the "soddies" scattered over the landscape, or the dugouts nestled quite out of sight under the low rounded hills. Thinking it unwise to advance farther, we turned back to the seat of learning by the side of road, but it appeared that the boys and girls had taken home their books and slates, not to return until the coming fall.

We lived one and one-fourth miles north of this school, and that autumn after the above adventure I became a pupil there. The building appeared from the inside even smaller

than from the outside. The floors were rough and the walls were unpainted. However, the drab interior was relieved by likenesses of Washington, Lincoln, and Grant. Reproductions of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* and Millet's *The Gleaners*, hung in appropriate places, indicating an unexpected appreciation of art. The motto, GOD BLESS OUR SCHOOL, done in highly ornamented letters, stood for a religious sentiment that was sincere and genuine.

Free textbooks had not yet reached this rural school and some of the very old texts as well as new ones were used. *The Royal Reader Series*, an English publication, was interesting and informative. I have a copy of No. VI, bearing the date 1877. *Smith's Arithmetic* was used in this school and in country schools generally during the 1870's, before the introduction of free textbooks. It has for its title page the following: "Practical Arithmetic, on a New Plan; in which Mental Arithmetic is combined with the use of the Slate; containing a complete System for all Practical Purposes; being in Dollars and Cents. By Roswell C. Smith; Philadelphia, William Marshall & Co., Third Edition, 1839." This book is four inches by six inches in size, contains 284 pages perfectly intact, with cardboard cover and leather back which hold the leaves firmly—a worthy tribute to the bookbinder's art and skill of that day. Strong recommendations of this work from *The Journal of Education*, issue of January, 1828, appear in the introduction of the book.

Ray's *New Mathematical Series* was widely used in Nebraska schools at this time. The author, Joseph Ray, M. D., was a teacher in Woodward College, Cincinnati, Ohio. His arithmetic texts, as well as his other mathematical treatises, were very popular. It was said that anyone who had mastered Ray's *Higher Arithmetic* was thoroughly prepared to teach the subject. The edition I have retained bears the copyright of 1880.

Kirkham's *English Grammar*, first published before 1828, appears to have embraced the basic science of the language sufficiently to meet the approval of competent



Thomas P. Beall



**ENGLISH GRAMMAR**  
IN  
**FAMILIAR LECTURES,**  
ACCOMPANIED BY A  
**COMPENDIUM;**  
EMBRACING  
**A NEW SYSTEMATICK ORDER OF PARSING,**  
**A NEW SYSTEM OF PUNCTUATION,**  
**EXERCISES IN FALSE SYNTAX,**  
AND  
**A SYSTEM OF PHILOSOPHICAL GRAMMAR**  
IN NOTES;  
TO WHICH ARE ADDED  
**AN APPENDIX, AND A KEY TO THE EXERCISES**  
DESIGNED  
FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS AND PRIVATE LEARNERS.

BY **SAMUEL KIRKHAM.**

*Stereotyped by Wm. Hagar & Co., New-York.*

TWENTY-FOURTH EDITION, ENLARGED AND IMPROVED.

ROCHESTER, N. Y.

**MARSHALL, DEAN, & CO.**

1831.

Kirkham's **English Grammar** was still found in the schools in the 1880's.

authorities through the years, for the text was still found in schools in the 1880's. My copy of the treatise bears the date, 1839, and compares favorably with the modern texts in content and treatment. This book is perhaps very similar to the one Lincoln owned and studied while attending Mentor Graham's school at New Salem, Illinois, in 1832. The author, Samuel Kirkham, a teacher in an academy in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was an exceptional scholar and educational leader who was held in high esteem by the teaching profession in his state.

Teachers during the early 1880's made extensive use of the current magazines and of the better story papers as well as of some of the agricultural journals. *The Western Rural*, published by Milton George, Chicago, *The Farm Journal*, edited at that time by Wilmer Atkinson, Philadelphia, and even the eastern journals, *The Rural New Yorker* and *The Country Gentleman*, were occasionally found in the schools and homes. *The Youth's Companion*, published in Boston under the fictitious name, Perry Mason & Co., was a favorite story paper found in many a sod house on the plains. It was an eight-page weekly, printed on excellent paper, with clear, beautiful illustrations. I recall stories written by the well-known writers, John T. Trowbridge, Frank W. Calkins, F. R. Stockton, C. A. Stephens, and Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Noilles Murfree). Their stories were read with delight in and out of school, and were regarded by parents and teachers as having a distinct educational value. In the *Companion* the poetry of Sidney Lanier, and of the youthful Clinton Scollard, as well as the verse of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, were read and studied with great interest. The poets, Longfellow and Tennyson, were still living, and their classics found a prominent place in the school curriculum.

Among the books I have from my childhood are two small volumes of Longfellow's Poems published in 1864, and *The Poetical Works of Collins, Gray, and Beattie*, in a single volume, which was published in 1854. Books of English literature were occasionally found in the homes of

the better educated families; for example, I still have a 12mo volume of *Shakespeare*, 1007 pages, including a sketch of the Bard and thirty-five illustrations. Appearing about the year 1850, it was sold in London for one shilling and in America for about fifty cents.

Higher education in the general opinion of most rural folk was not a practical necessity, and there were few boys and girls of the outlying communities who were ambitious for college training. By far the greater number of country teachers were not advanced in learning, but in many instances their strength of character—sincerity, integrity, cleanliness of body and mind—compensated in a measure for the lack of a college degree.

A notable example with respect to character, combined with a sincere aim to achieve success through education, was a young teacher named Ernest von Forell. (In later life he omitted the *von* from his name). Young Forrel was a teacher in the rural school already mentioned—in the old District No. 28, Thayer County. He had come with his parents from Illinois in the early 1870's, had worked on his father's farm, and had advanced his education by a year's attendance at a small college in Kansas. After his rural school teaching experience he earned his first degree at a denominational college in Nebraska, entered the ministry, and was later chosen chaplain at the Nebraska Industrial School at Kearney. In 1897 he was elected a member of the University Board of Regents, and was the president of the Board during his incumbency. It was during the period of Regent Forell's administration that the scholarly Elisha Benjamin Andrews, formerly president of Brown, was chosen chancellor at Nebraska.

During the decade following the year 1880, the youngsters who trudged to the little white or brown schoolhouses, or to those made of sod, learned without realizing it, lessons of thrift, sobriety, and self-reliance. For the average boy or girl there was little unwholesome attraction near or far. The crowded, swiftly moving horseless carriages

over the long, smooth, modern highway, were not even a dream; and the death toll from the reckless or unsteady hand of youth was unknown. That ugly word, delinquency, in its new sinister meaning, had not yet appeared in the family vocabulary.