

Pre-Mcguffey Education

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PRE-McGUFFEY EDUCATION

Before the McGuffey type of school textbooks came into use the teaching of youth in the Ohio Valley was already a settled purpose. Our institution has a number of the "schoolbooks" made there about a century ago by ancestors of a large number of Iowa citizens. They are of the type quite familiar to the octogenarian, but to the teacher in the public schools of today they are but superficially understood. The man who produced one of these books told, in his ninetieth year, of the training he received in the production of the book in Darke County, Ohio, in 1828.

It formed the first bound collection of clean white paper sheets he had ever possessed. It was purchased by him when he was eighteen years old from the proceeds of three days' labor, the price he then inscribed in the book being 37½ cents. He earned money at the same wage to pay his first instructor. He had learned his a-b-c's from his father. He had been prompted in the reading of "Poor Richard" and the Bible by a preacher-shoemaker neighbor.

His first lesson was to learn the materials he must bring from the woods and from the distant store which entered into the composition of inks, both black and blue. His experiments continued under instruction and criticism until he could unerringly produce different amounts of inks with identical color and consistency. In this period he learned to select the proper feathers and learned to select the best shape and type of knife blade from the cutlery of the time with which to make the pens. The designation "pen-knife" so common then, survives to this day in our usage, for these more shapely blades. He acquired the art of bringing the blade to the proper edge, and of holding or keeping that edge. Precision in the slant with which the quill was first cut, then in bringing the pen to its point, with the final nib, placing the slit to allow the spread, and scraping the quill to produce the correct

spring or resilience, was a long course. It was a practical, if not a liberal education of the eyes, nerves and muscles. It produced both visual and muscular dexterity that remained with this farmer to the end of his life. With average ingenuity it adapted itself to a thousand problems of practical mechanics, resulting, of course, in the saving of his time, money and annoyance. That was an object of his education, and one of the essential lessons of "Poor Richard."

Mental arithmetic had saved paper and so strengthened the mind that not one of his "sums" in addition, subtraction, multiplication, or short division ever reached the written form. Moreover, the pupil never had a "sum" in these rudiments set before his eyes. All was "told" him orally by the instructor. The faculty of attention in the pupil and later, precision of statement as a teacher, developed and remained models throughout their lives.

Applying pen to paper, the first entry in the book is a problem in "The Single Rule of Three." From that first problem to the last, one in "Longitude and Time," is evidence of that care with pen, accuracy in calculation, and general precision which reveals merit in that type of school. Diagrams and tabulations show orderly thought. Such books, when finished, marked the exact course and the full distance the pupil had been led. It indicated proficiency in writing, arithmetic, spelling, and somewhat in reading, and gives us the tangent of a life with its illiterate origin.

In another part of the book occurs the penmanship course, with its script unfailingly legible, and the texts and mottoes, which modified, if they did not afterward govern, this pupil. They were one source of his wise sayings, the foundation of his prudence, and, with his persistent plodding in Bible reading, made the good man known for four full score years for his probity and discretion.

That type of teaching was exactly suited to youth in the excitement of the political and religious stress of the times. It served parents galled by the limitations and the disadvantages of illiteracy. It contributed toward an intelligent "American stock." It produced one Lincoln and a population of pioneers of our commonwealth.

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