

# Self-Government in The Omaha Schools

Among the recent school innovations none is attracting more attention than what is called the school city—a practical experiment in school government by and through the school children themselves, organized under mayors, councils and courts of their own choosing. The idea is said to have originated with Mr. Wilson L. Gill, now living in New York City, whose experiments have been described recently in a most interesting article from the pen of Dr. Albert Shaw, in his December Review of Reviews. In this illustration are given and reference made to the various schools where the plan has been put into effect, including the Kellom school at Omaha, under the principalship of Miss Anna Foss.

No one can tell better of the inception and workings of the system as applied in the Kellom school than Miss Foss herself,

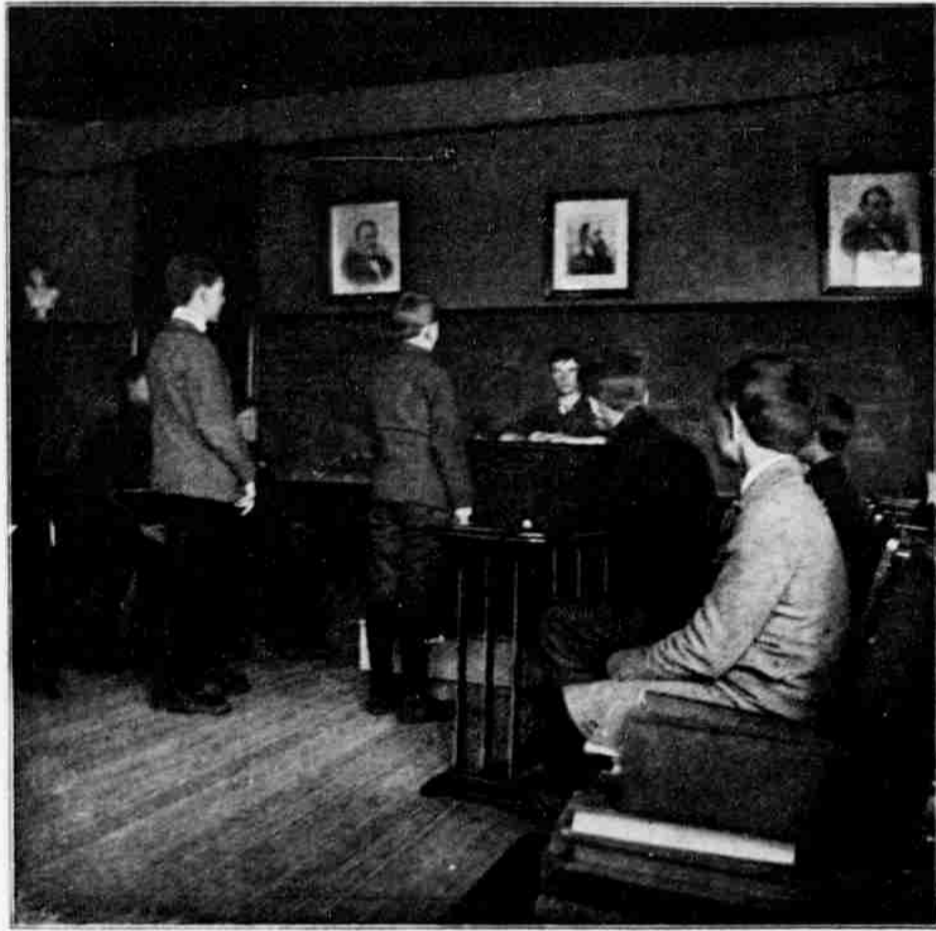
needed, and made up a kind of school charter out of it. Then they had also a little manual the council used.

"The resolutions passed were carried out as far as the children were concerned. Of course not so promptly with the sidewalks and the yard, etc., although we would send word to the superintendent of buildings as to what they needed. So far as the children were concerned, however, they really considered themselves under obligations to pay attention to what was said to them.

"And we had a police court. Of course some person, either one of the other teachers or myself, was always present, but they always stepped up and paid their fines without a word. The fine was always either a cent, or they would have to work it out by doing some extra work after school. The money was invested at the end of the year



THE SCHOOL CITY—COUNTING THE NOTES AT KELLOM SCHOOL, OMAHA.—Photo by courtesy Review of Reviews.



THE SCHOOL CITY—A CULPRIT BEFORE SCHOOL, OMAHA.—Photo by courtesy

THE POLICE JUDGE AT THE KELLOM Review of Reviews.

who talked instructively on the subject the other day.

"Is our experiment to be traced to Mr. Gill? Yes," said Miss Foss. "I went to New York two years ago. Mr. Gill used to live in Columbus, O., so that I knew him very well. He is quite a philanthropic man. He spent all he had—quite a fortune—in this way and he told me he had started a school down in the slums, and asked me if I would not like to visit it. I went down to the slums and found they really had a very good school there. The children were from about as low a class of people, I guess, as you will find in New York. And yet these boys and girls, well dressed and clean, seemed to know about the city government of New York. They got up and talked about nominating a mayor. This one thought this man and another that man would be the best for the place.

### The Beginning in Omaha.

"It interested me and I thought they were quite learned in politics or rather government, as practiced, without studying it and so I talked it over with Mr. Gill and concluded when I came back that we would try it in our school. That was two years ago. So we took only the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades—six rooms—which we divided, three rooms on a side, into 'rights' and 'lefts,' so as not to make it a political division. The pupils took an immediate interest in it and they held their meetings and nominated their candidates.

"We had our first election by common ballot. We made little ballots and had a ballot box and the children passed by and dropped them in, as they chose. Last year City Clerk Highy, who had heard about our school, came up and taught the children how to vote by the Australian ballot. So after that they would have their registration of voters and then they voted regularly, while the judges and clerks stopped any boy who came in if his name was not on the registration book."

"Did the children meet regularly?"

"Yes; the first year nearly every month, in order to get them used to it."

"Did they elect officers often?"

"Yes; so each would have a better chance last year we held an election about every two or three months."

### The Work of the Council.

"What did they do at their meetings besides voting? They had their council meetings, you know. They elected a mayor and council and police judge and city clerk, and at the council meeting they used to do a good deal of talking. They would talk about the state of the sidewalks and the halls and the recitation rooms, how the children abused this or that privilege and what they should not or should do. We took the city charter and took out of it what we really

in a few things for the graduating class. I think it aggregated about 75 cents or a dollar."

"What kind of offenses did they take cognizance of in that police court?"

"Well, for instance, if a boy was very disorderly in the yard, abused other boys by spoiling their clothes, taking their hats and tearing them or rushing around on the sod terrace and spoiling it, they were quite often fined. We had certain boys as policemen, and they entered the complaint. It was not necessary in the police court to have a regular trial by jury or anything of that kind, but just by the judge."

### A Police Court Incident.

"A little incident happened when we first started about the police judge. He

was a pretty big fellow. A few days after he had been elected to the office of police

judge he got into a fight with another boy nearly as big as he was and gave him an awful thrashing. So the council impeached him. He came up before the council without showing that he felt at all bad about it—in fact, he was quite intelligent. I recommended mercy myself to the council and they said they were perfectly willing to reinstate him in his office if he felt that he had been doing wrong and would give expression to that feeling. But he was not willing to resign the office on those terms. He persisted that he did not feel that he had been doing very wrong, so they concluded to create a vacancy in the office and to appoint some one else. When they did this he did not act as if he cared at all, and I did not suppose he did. But after it was all over he came down to the office and he said: "Well, Miss Foss, I have had my punishment, now, what are you going to do with the other boy?" And I said: "Why, I think you have punished him. Don't you think so?" He has a mighty black eye. And I added: "Do you think he needs any more punishment than that?" And he kind of laughed and said: "No, I guess he don't." And he walked off, satisfied.

"No, they did not have a school board. We drew the line at a school board. I was afraid they would get too personal. They might try to arraign our teachers."

"Are they keeping the school up this year again?"

"Yes, but we have been crowded and so busy that we have merely started it, and that is all we can do until the Cass street school opens, when we will be relieved. We have not yet elected officers this year. They are talking about it and they are going to, soon. The last mayor we had was young Baumer, the jeweler's son, who made a first rate mayor."

### No Girl Mayor Yet.

"Have you ever had a girl elected mayor?"

"No. That is a funny thing about it. Many seem to favor woman's rights, but they never elect a girl mayor. The girls have a vote and if they would all vote for a girl they would elect her, but they do not

do it. They seem to think that the mayor

ought to be a man."

"Have you any ideas about developing

the experiment further?"

"Why, I think we shall continue it. I

think it is a good thing for the children,

I know in New York they think it is a

fine thing to give to the child clear ideas

about self-government. And it does in a

way I do not think it can be made respon-

sible for the entire government of the school,

I do not believe that all children are able

to know the right from the wrong until

they are taught. I think you can guide

them so that they will govern themselves

very well, but they must be guided. They

really think they govern themselves and we

encourage them in this belief to a great

extent. Of course I am always the court of

last resort, so that if there is anything seri-

ous it is left to me and I decide it.

"I do not think it practicable for the lower

grades. When we wanted to clean up for

the Transmississippi Exposition, they were

organized into battalions, with head captains

and all that, but that is about all we ever

had for them. I do not think it a good thing

to apply to the little fellows. They think

differently in New York and they may suc-

ceed."

"I believe I was the first to take hold

of this," said the matron in the electric

seal coat, freezingly.

The humble-looking little woman held on

for a minute, studying her antagonist, then

she slowly relaxed her hold on the box.

"Well, you can have it," she said, ami-

ably. "You look as if you need the soap."

The bargain counter is the place to ob-

serve how they love one another.

—

A Memphis paper tells of a married

couple who are in the habit occasionally of

going out at night to entertainments and

social affairs, and at such times they make

themselves solid with their little boy by

saying that they are going out to see a

sick man. One week these social affairs

came pretty frequently. On Monday night

they went to the theater, and told the lad

that they had to sit up with the sick man.

Tuesday night they went out to visit a

neighbor, and explained that they were

going to give some medicine to the man

that was sick. On Wednesday night they

proposed to attend an entertainment, and

apologized to the young chap by saying that

they had to put a plaster on the sick man's

back to draw out the pain. "Papa," asked

the youth, "is the sick man in much pain?"

"Very much, my son." "And is he pretty

near dead?" "Yes, he's in bad shape." The

lad thought deeply for a while, and then

remarked: "Well, papa, he can't die any

too soon to suit me."

—

Congressman Gordon of Ohio, better

known as "Bob" Gordon, is handsome and

rich and a bachelor, reports the Washing-

ton Post. He is a perfect Adonis of the

blonde type. When quite a young man—

he is still young, for that matter—Gordon

used to work in his father's flour mill and

the dust affected his lungs. "Consumption,"

said the doctor, and Gordon believed

him. Still, even a sick man will try to

make the best of a bad situation and Gor-

don started east for the purpose of having

a good time as long as he might live. He

spent a week in New York, all the time

feeling the shadow of death was over him

and envying healthy men with an honest

envy. Then he went to Atlantic City and

watched the whirling eddies of life, quite

sad, of course, because he was doomed to

depart from this world so soon.

As the days went by Gordon noticed that

he did not seem to be growing any worse

and one day he weighed himself. He had

gained twelve pounds.

"Heaven above!" said Gordon. "A man

who is dying doesn't gain twelve pounds in

twelve days. I guess that doctor didn't know

his business."

And with a wild whoop of delight Gordon

rushed to the telegraph office, wired for

some more money and started on a year's

holiday. When he went back to Ohio he was

as fat as a 2-year-old colt and he has never

had a sick day from that time to this. He

is the healthiest-looking man in the house.

—

A good story is told in Leslie's Weekly

of an experience of Joseph Jefferson, the

great actor. A number of years ago he

played a one-night engagement in a small

Indiana town, appearing in his favorite

part of Rip Van Winkle. In the hotel at

which he stopped was an Irishman "re-

cently landed," who acted as porter and

general assistant. Judged by the deep and

serious interest which he took in the house

he might have been clerk, lessee, and

proprietor rolled into one. At about 6 o'clock

in the morning Mr. Jefferson was startled

by a violent thumping on his door. When

he struggled into consciousness and realized

that he had left no "call" order at the of-

fice he was naturally very indignant. But

his sleep was spoiled for that morning,

so he arose and soon after appeared before

the clerk. "See here," he demanded of

that individual, "why was I called at this

unearthly hour?" "I don't know, sir," an-

swered the clerk; "I'll ask Mike." The

Irishman was summoned. Said the clerk:

"Mike, there was no call for Mr. Jefferson.

Why did you disturb him?" Taking the

clerk by the lapel of the coat the Hibernian

led him to one side and said in a mysterious

whisper: "He were shoring like a horse,

sor, and Ol'd heard the b'ys say so how he

were onct after shapling for twenty years,

so Ol see to meself, now Ol, 'Molke, it's a

coming into him agin and it's yer duty to

git the crayther out o' yer house in-

stantly!"



THE SCHOOL CITY—COUNCIL MEETING AT THE KELLOM SCHOOL, OMAHA.—Photo by courtesy Review of Reviews.