

What I Can Now Remember of My First Day at School

Some of Omaha's Pioneer Citizens Recall Their Start Up the Long, High Hill of Learning



JUDGE DOANE

ELEAZER WAKELEY

JUDGE LEE S. ESTELLE

JOE REDMAN

W. B. CHRISTIE

Still sits the school house by the road,
A ragged beggar sunning;
Around it still the sumachs grow
And blackberry vines are running.

Within, the master's desk is seen,
Deep scarred by raps official;
The warping floor, the battered seats,
The jackknife's carved initial.

The charcoal frescoes on its wall:
It's door's worn sill, betraying
The feet that, creeping slow to school,
Went storming out to playing.

WHITTIER probably did not know how well he wrote. Probably he did not know that this simple picture through all the years to come would moisten the eyes of old men. To be sure, all school houses in the old days were not alike. Sumachs grew around not all of them, nor blackberry vines; but the battered seats and the jackknife's carved initials were common to all school houses in the old days, more common even than now, when school children are kept under greater restraint.

But the picture suggests to every old man a picture of the particular school house in which his young idea was taught to shoot and carries him back to some of the joys and sorrows of those days. Several Omaha men, most of whose work is done or will be done before a great many more years have passed, slipped back in spirit into the old school houses when the lines were quoted to them and their eyes grew brighter as they spoke of childhood's days.

Lee Estelle's Start

Judge Lee S. Estelle's first day in school was a far from happy one; in fact, it was so unhappy that there was no second day until two years later. The boy's misery was the result of that chasmic difference between a little lad's view of mice and an "old maid's" view of the same animals.

"I can remember it just as distinctly as if it were yesterday," said Judge Estelle. I suppose it was because it was such a terrible experience and we always remember such things. The teacher was Jane Polar. I hated her then and I almost hate her yet.

"I was tickled over the idea of going to school. I was 5 or 6 years old, I guess, and I thought I was getting into the big boy class by starting to school."

"It was in Frankfort, O., sometimes called 'Oldtown.' We lived only three blocks from the school, so I was sent off alone. Before I got there I turned around and went back home to get my mice.

Mice Were Well Trained

"I had four little mice that I had found and tamed. I kept them in a little cigar box. My brother had made a little wagon out of spools and some harness, and I used to hitch up the mice to the wagon and have lots of fun. They had a little bed in their stable and there were pegs for the harness. The mice would do pretty nearly anything I wanted them to do.

"Well, I happened to think of my mice and I went back and got them. I got to school all right and was placed in one of the back seats. I put the box down on the seat beside me. I was interested in what was going on, but after a while I got tired and lost interest. Then I thought of the mice.

"I got them out of their box and proceeded to hitch them up, feeding them first, of course. I wasn't thinking of the other children nor trying to attract their attention, but they quickly saw what I was doing and before a great while those

around me were watching the mice and very few were paying any attention to what Miss Polar said.

Pupils Interested in Performance

"From where the teacher was she couldn't see what was going on, so she came walking back to find out what the trouble was. Well, when she saw those mice she let out a scream, ran back to the front of the room and jumped up on a chair.

"She called to some of the big boys to take 'those horrid mice' out doors and kill them. When I heard that I got my mice into their box as quickly as I could and started to run; but the big boys caught me, and while the teacher urged them on they took the mice away from me and went out doors and killed them, trampling on them. I stood there and cried until they got through and then I started to run home.

"I was yelling at the top of my voice, 'I'll kill that old Jane Polar! I'll kill her! I'll kill her! She killed my mice! She killed my mice!'

"When I got to Davy Anderson's store, between our home and the school house, old Davy came out and caught me in his arms. He took me into the store and I told him all about the tragedy—it was a tragedy to me. Finally he got me consoled with candy and I went home—but I didn't go back to school for two years.

Stoned the Teacher

"I don't suppose the teacher would have had my mice killed if she had realized how I prized them; but she had a great aversion, greater even than that of the average woman. I never got over my hatred for her. She died before I went back to school. Until she was taken sick I used to lie in wait for her when she passed our house and throw rocks at her. I would get punished for this, but I would soon be at it again. Finally she got so she would go around the block or run past as fast as she could on the far side of the street to escape my wrath.

Ran Away to War

"I ran away from the same school again about ten years later. Seventeen of us ran away to Salem, ten miles from Frankfort, to enlist. Everybody was talking war then and we all wanted to go to the front. Some of us had no trouble after the enlistment, but others did. Our parents took several of us back home on writs of habeas corpus and I was one, though later I managed to get away and the folks at home thought if I was so determined to go to war they might as well let me."

Judge Eleazer Wakeley was carried back to his first school days, but he could not recall his very first day in school.

"Nothing happened that day to fix it specially

in my memory," said Judge Wakeley. "I remember it only in a general way as I remember all the first days of school. I had heard the larger boys speak of floggings, and I had a sort of idea that flogging was as much a part of the course of study as reading and writing and arithmetic. We had those old-fashioned benches that everyone nowadays has seen in pictures. Everything was new and interesting to me when I gained courage enough to take my eyes from a single spot on the floor in front of me. This was not until many days had passed, for the fear of flogging kept me still. I hoped it might be delayed and felt that the more quiet I should remain the longer the physical training might be postponed.

Judge Wakeley's School Days

"After days had passed and there was no flogging I began to look about me. That's about all I remember of my first school days."

From an intimate friend of Judge Wakeley for many years it has been learned that as a school boy he was regarded with a sort of awe by most of his fellows. Somehow, he could run faster and jump further than other boys in the school. He could swim like a fish and when it came to diving he was in a class by himself. Now he is no record breaker in any of these fields of endeavor, being more than 90 years old. He is only a great jurist, revered and almost worshipped by thousands of friends, many of them lawyers, a man who has had and still has much more than his share of honors.

Early Days in Illinois

J. H. Hulbert, district court bailiff, who is 73 and looks about 50, got to school before his time.

"It was at Hebron, Ill.," said Mr. Hulbert. "I ran away and went to school. It was about a mile away. It was in town, but it was almost like the country. My sister was gone and they told me she had gone to school, so I started out to find her. I got to school and found her and they let me sit with her and eat some candy. I would have had a good time, but my folks found out where I was. They found out I was gone and got to making inquiries. Pretty soon somebody told them they had seen something that looked like a little boy going over the hill in the direction of the school house. They guessed it was me and they came and got me.

"When I got old enough to go to school I was pretty big for my age. The first day I was there I

got a licking. I was a hero because I got licked so soon after I started to school. I made such a good impression that way that I thought I would make it a little stronger, so I took a run with a vaulting pole and was going to show them what a good vaulter I was for a boy my size. The pole slipped and I struck my chin on it. That's what made this scar here."

Uncle Bill Christie Once a Boy

"Uncle Bill" Christie's weather beaten old face wrinkled into a wonderful smile and his eyes twinkled merrily when he told of his first day in the little old-fashioned school house at Urbana, O., years and years ago. W. B. Christie is his real name, but more people know him as just plain "Uncle Bill." He is an old republican war-horse. He still is mightily interested in politics, but when asked about his first day in school he forgot all about the Chicago hostilities and made his confession.

"I got the tar licked out of me," said "Uncle Bill." "My teacher was Miss Fish. She was a nice lady, but I didn't like her even if she was. I behaved myself pretty well after the first day, but it was because my folks made me. There was a knot-hole in the floor right by my seat. I got to spitting at it to see if I could hit it. I think I spit about 100 times and the last time I pretty near hit it. She caught me and dragged me to the front of the room and said she was going to lick me.

"I was a stubborn little cuss and I started to fight. I used my teeth and my feet and I just about tore all her clothes off. Some of mine got pretty well torn, too. When we got through I guess it was what the prize fighters call a 'draw.' She sent me back to my seat.

"When I got home my mother had heard about it already—I think the teacher had sent word to her—and she gave me a walloping. She grabbed off her shoe and she went after me right. After that I behaved pretty well. I wasn't afraid of Miss Fish, but I knew what I would get when I got home. In that old school we used to get a fish hook and line and bait it and let it down through a knothole and catch a rat, but I never did that only when I thought I was strong enough to stand a good walloping from my mother."

"Joe" Redman's Beginning

"Uncle Joe" Redman said he couldn't remember whether there were any sumachs growing around the first school house he ever saw, nor whether there were any blackberry vines running around it; but he had a distinct recollection that there was something growing around there from which very effective switches were cut.

"Uncle Joe" is another old "standby" of the

republicans and it is a rule of the Fifth Ward Republican club that no meeting shall be called for order until "Uncle Joe" and "Uncle Bill" are on the platform, one at each side of the presiding officer.

"I don't think much of anything happened the first day I was in school," said "Uncle Joe." "If there had I would remember it better. I remember something that happened a little later, though. Our schoolmaster was a fierce old fellow. I guess he never had been a boy. After I had been in school a while I got me a girl. The girls and the boys were kept apart, the girls on one side and the boys on the other. I brought an apple to school for my girl one day, but I was late to school and couldn't see her before school took up. I tried to roll it over the floor to her.

"I guess I would have got a good licking if it hadn't been for one of the big boys. The old schoolmaster—I forget his name—wanted to know who rolled that apple. I was scared to death and didn't answer. This big fellow—I guess he had seen me—jumped up and said he did it. He was too big for the schoolmaster to try to lick, so he just told him not to do it again. You bet, I was the friend of that boy from then on. I know his name well enough, but I can't just call it now."

When Judge Doane Started

The present political uproar would serve to remind former Judge George W. Doane of his first school days. He is not a republican, but a very good democrat and as a democrat has had his share of honors and probably some more.

"My first schoolmaster was Caleb Atwater," said Judge Doane. "I did not have him very long and I knew his successor better. It was in Circleville, O., where I was born. Atwater afterwards became quite a historian and wrote the first history of Ohio.

"After Atwater I went to school to a man named Warno, who was a typical old style schoolmaster. Of course, there were no public schools then; all were private. I remember one circumstance that helps me fix the date. It was in the fall of 1832. One day the time came for the noon recess. We expected to go out for an hour, as usual. Just before noon Mr. Warno said, 'You boys get your books together and put them in order. Then you needn't come back today. I want you all to go out and hurrah for Jackson all afternoon!'

"We went, but we didn't all hurrah for Jackson. Warno was a great Jackson man, and Jackson was very popular in those parts. He was like Roosevelt in some ways. He had some of those qualities which make Roosevelt popular and a peculiar magnetism which drew people to him."