

The First School – Reminiscence of Early Pioneer Days

Taught in the Center District by Mrs. Cornelia Hazard in 1849

To the remnant of old settlers and others gathered at Watertown Center School House, Thanksgiving, November 24, 1904 – Greetings.

I am asked to write a history of the first school taught in your district, which was my first school, and as I contemplate trying to comply with the request, my mind is flooded with memories of many things. Of the people leaving the comforts of a higher civilization and coming into this then dense wilderness to carve out a home for themselves, but even more, that their children and their children's children might reap the fruits of their noble and heroic sacrifices: of their struggles to give their children at least the foundation of an education in the face of what would seem in these days almost insurmountable obstacles. There will be some with you to give the history of the building of the house, its size and arrangements, but well I know that all entered into the project with spirit, and waited with anxiety to see the fulfillment of their hopes.

I arrived in Wacousta January 9, 1849, lacking still four and a half months of sixteen years of age. The next day, Mr. Sidney Frary came to see if I would go and teach a short term of school for them. They had not been able to complete their school house in time to secure the primary school money for that year, but felt they could not wait another six months or more, so would have to raise the amount necessary by a rate bill. I was very much astonished, as I had no idea I was capable of filling so responsible a position, but after some persuasion, I decided to make the attempt. But if any of the officials of this great nation ever feel any heavier responsibility on assuming their duties than I did, they are certainly to be commiserated.

The director, Mr. Frary, came after me on a Sunday afternoon, his team a handsome bay Indian pony, his vehicle a homemade cutter, called in common parlance, a "pung," his harness decidedly primitive with ropes for lines, our robe a common bed quilt. But he let no one for a moment imagine the faintest inclination to ridicule, or view the outfit with contempt. I should have resented anything of the kind on the part of anyone, yet if we had a picture of it now, it would involuntarily provoke a smile. But it was evidently the best that could be afforded, and I at once accepted it as such.

My remuneration was to be the magnificent sum of \$1.50 per week – the best price paid women teachers at that time; the term was eight weeks. There were only ten scholars in the district, but Franklin L. Tift and Emily Badger came from a district four miles east of here, boarding with the family of Sidney Loomis. The pupils belonging in the district were John and (*unknown*) Lowell, Miss Sabra Russel, a sister of Mrs. Frary, the three oldest children of Sidney Loomis, Mary, Cornelia and (*unknown*). Elias Garlock's two oldest sons, Julius and Willard; Frank Sanborn's oldest son, Josephus, and a younger daughter of Mr. and Mrs. House, who lived in the house afterwards owned by Mr. William Coleman. They were a remarkably orderly lot of scholars. When given a recess, rarely engaged in any sports, and soon returning into the schoolhouse.

But I am sure those of them who are still here will remember as they look back upon those days that they worked hard. For the royal road to learning had not been discovered, and teachers thought if they were not every moment busy, they were defrauding their patrons of their just due. So as there were too few small classes to occupy the time while the larger ones were learning their lessons, they were called up to read three times in each half day. Rather prosy and stern treatment for young children compared to the kindergarten work of today. But that would have been scorned as *fol-de-rol* in those days. They were hardy, little likely to suffer physically and were intensely interested in what they had heard talked in their homes with so much earnestness for a year, all, even the youngest entered into their work with zest and made excellent progress. I think one of the younger scholars – of ten and younger – had never attended school before, or even been in a school at all, even for day.

After about four weeks, one of the patrons, I think Mr. Elias Garlock, asked if we could not have some spelling schools. Feeling deeply my youth and inexperience, I replied, "I would gladly do so if the officers and patrons will ensure me the ability to maintain order," which they promised to do, and we held two, perhaps two weeks apart, at which the house was crowded, one or two loads coming over from Wacousta, and each time did a full evening's work from "Webster's (old) Elementary," giving a short intermission for rest and interchange of sociability. And it provides a hearty laugh now as I look back upon it, to think with what rigor I insisted upon the most perfect order.

No doubt some who will be present with you can give some incidents that I do not recall, and also tell who it was that spelled down the two schools. The most that I recall was the feeling of responsibility, the anxiety to do the best work, and the impression that I had the best scholars I

had ever known, a fact which no doubt went towards making the school the success it was. In fact, I have no recollection that any one of them ever gave me the slightest trouble during the whole term.

As was the custom in those days, the teacher “boarded round,” and each vied with the other to make her as comfortable as possible. One incident I may relate, that with my serious turn of mind I did not quite understand. But those of you who knew Sidney Loomis and his drollery will readily comprehend his gravely informing me one day when I sat down to the table, “well, I suppose your time is up when your meal is half done; but I won’t be particular, you may eat about as much as usual.”

But everyone received the teacher eagerly and with cordiality and gave her the best they had, often under circumstances that would be truly embarrassing to any of us now. But I am sure it will not seem invidious if I pay a special tribute to the motherly kindness of the elder Mrs. Lowell, with whom I was privileged to make my home and made welcome in especially stormy days when it would be well nigh impossible to reach the remoter localities. When a storm came in the night and caught me at the farther distances, the host would take his steers and sled to carry scholars and teacher to school.

One of the incidents of that winter was when John Lowell, then 17 years of age, took several including the teacher, with his four year old steers and sled covered with straw, but without any box, to Wacousta to attend a school exhibition in the evening at the close of Benjamin Macomber’s school – the team being so slightly broken to drive that John was obliged to walk at their heads all the way through the deep snow; he seeming to enjoy it as much as those that rode. And none took their lot as a hard one, or dreamt they were heroes or heroines – all went to their daily duties with a cheerfulness and bravery that would put to shame many a one far better situated in those days. The ground was covered with deep snow, and sleighing was of the finest during the whole school term, which closed about the middle of March. But the opportunity coming sometime in April to return for a few hours visit, I was astounded to find the roads so terrible that one would with the greatest difficulty keep inside a lumber wagon.

But I think nothing could impress upon the younger members of this generation the exceeding newness of the country as a map drawn of the township dotting upon it the little clearings, here

and there a log cabin or shanty on them, and all the rest dense woods of large trees, many of them gigantic. For instance, from Mr. Frary's corners (one mile south of the Center), west lived Frank Sanborn and Sidney Loomis and then the clearing and road ended; south of the corners, Cassin Lowell on the corner and farther south, Mr. House and Daniel Sherman, no more houses to the turnpike, and for some distance each way. East, the clearing extended less than a quarter of a mile and no houses. North of the schoolhouse was Josiah Lowell's – now Benjamin King's – some clearing on east side of the road, but no house; an unoccupied log house on the corner north, now Mrs. Gall's, with possibly an acre of ground cleared about it, then east to Elias Garlock's (with some woods between), which was the only clearing on that road for (I suppose) several miles.

Coming north of the Center, where your schoolhouse now stands, we struck into solid woods, the road winding through among the trees to the Hunter bridge. On the Hunter corner was a five acre clearing but no house; where Will Bush now lives; a small log house with a few acres cleared, in which lived Mr. Hamil; between our two bridges to the east of here, not a clearing. A road had been cut out, four rods wide, but was grown to the wagon tracks with brush-blackberry and others. Not a tree was cut or road west of the Center corners to the river north and nearly to Mr. Lowell's south. Half a mile north of Wacousta one came to solid woods extending nearly six miles. But I forbear.

When I enter upon this subject I do now know where to leave off. I have reached far beyond this subject, and can only hope those present may be able to give details and incidents which, through the many years intervening, may have become dimmed to me, but the general impression seems almost as vivid to me as though memories of a few years. But now nearly all are gone, only a few are left to look back upon those scenes, which to this generation no picture can paint and no pen fully describe.