



Photo by Bruce Genut

Victorian young ladies pursuing a "genteel" education at a Rochester women's seminary where art, poetry, music and needlepoint were the order of the day. The photo was taken at the Rochester Museum and Science Center.

Scholarly Echoes from 1875

By JOAN M. SMITH

What was it like going to school in Rochester back in 1875? Well for one thing there were no school buses. Feet were the primary means of transportation along with horse drawn cars which could be ridden for a five-cent fare.

Since New York State had adopted a revised compulsory attendance law in 1874 (it required only 14 weeks of attendance per year, eight of which had to be consecutive), the move was on to secure, at least a basic education for all youngsters.

This law also declared that "those who cared for the children should cause them to be instructed in spelling, reading, writing, English grammar, arithmetic." Unfortunately, the law did not specifically direct that schools must teach these subjects.

Most classroom instruction in Rochester, however, did center around the 3 Rs with German language classes introduced in 1872. Art and music also were included.

According to the general regulations put forth by the Rochester Board of Education in their 1875 report, the school year would commence on the first Monday of September and end on the last Friday in June. School hours were 9 a.m. to noon, and 1:30 to 4 p.m. Holidays were listed as, "Saturdays, Thanksgiving Day, Washington's Birthday, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, the intervening days between Christmas and New Year's, and 'Fast Days' by public proclamation."

Though the state was working toward an adequate school system, education was not the primary concern of the Mid-Victorian age.

There were problems such as heavy teaching loads, squabbles over teacher salaries, tenure, school budgets, and inadequate facilities.

Schools were dark and uncomfortable since new methods of lighting and ventilation had yet to be introduced. The buildings were heated by chunk (wood) stoves, and sanitary conveniences were unavailable.

Religion was under fire in the public school system, and in 1875 the city adopted a ban against reading the Bible and other religious instructions in the public schools.

By 1875 the graded system which had been adopted in the 1850s was firmly established, at least in city schools. Each grade had its own teacher and classroom which was separated from other rooms by glass partitions.

The largest expansion in schools during this period occurred within the parochial system where under the auspices of Bishop Bernard McQuaid 10 Catholic free schools were established by 1890.

In 1875 Nazareth Academy was on Jay Street, and was a girl's boarding school with grades one through second year high school. The school's prospectus stated, "The Course of Studies include all the branches of a useful and Christian education." It also noted that the school year began on the first Monday in September and ended on July 1.

Miss Seward's F-E-male Seminary on Alexander Street, and the Rochester Female Academy at 81 South Fitzugh St. also were available for young ladies who in comfortable Victorian rooms could learn the finer points of educational culture — art, needlepoint and poetry.

The 1875 variety of gym consisted of baseball for boys, and dance and rhythm for girls to develop their grace and strength. Archery was a favorite sport and was included in higher learning institutions' sports programs. Ice skating, and bicycling were favorite pastimes for people of all ages, but were not included in school curriculum.

What little physical education was available for school children had to be endured by girls in their long dresses and high buttoned shoes. At that time young boys to the age of six wore kilts, and then graduated into knickers, ruffled shirts, ties and jackets. Girls had no choice. It was long skirts tied with elegant sashes, and wide-brimmed hats or bows for their heads.

Around this time, however, the infamous "bloomer" (a ballooned culotte for ladies) made its appearance. It caused a social havoc which lasted right into the 20th Century when in 1909 Dr. E. E. Bruce of the State Board of Education condemned them as "unnecessary and unladylike, giving the children a false impression."

It would be years before Victorian social attitudes would begin to give way under the pressures of a fast changing world, and another century before certain educational theories would be challenged, such as the one held by Rev. Dr. John Todd who in 1871 stated, "The normal structure, the physiology, the diseases, the habit of thought and feeling of the female properly bans her from the halls of higher learning."

A hundred years have put that theory to rest as this September both women and men prepare to pursue their academic endeavors.

A 1973 survey by the U.S.

Department of Health, Education, and Welfare stated. "Up to and including the Master's level, the difference in educational attainment between males and females has been very slight indeed."

Education has definitely come a long way since 1875.



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The "risque" bloomer of 1875 as displayed at the Rochester Museum and Science Center.

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