

Reminiscences of St. Thomas School Days—*Continued*

Among the old grammar-school boys, say from 1861 to the end of 1866, may be mentioned William Mandeville Merritt and his brother George, Adolphus Williams, ex-M.P.P., Frank Ermatinger, and his brother the Judge, Thomas E. White, chief engineer of the Mackenzie and Mann railway system, Edward Hughes and his cousin, Malcolm Wilson, Henry and William F. Ellis, Archibald J., Robert and Tom Kains, William Pearce, C. E., George Casey, M. P., John Graham of Dunwich, John Thompson of Cowal, Dr. McLay of Aylmer, Charles Caulfield, Charles Stanton and John Young-husband. There were a good many girls as well.

A feature of the old schools was the quarterly or half-yearly public examination. The pupils put on their best clothes and best manners; the schoolroom was a bower of evergreens; the teacher's desk was a solid mass of roses and lilies. The fathers and mothers were present in large numbers. Trustees deemed it a duty to attend. The walls were lined with visitors, some seated on chairs or benches, and more standing up. The classes were put through their paces by the teachers, visitors occasionally putting test questions. By the correctness of the answers the school and the teachers were judged. The best pupils were of course put prominently forward on these occasions. Prizes, sometimes very numerous, the gifts of generous citizens and farmers, were distributed. One of which I was the proud possessor was the gift of the late Patrick Bohler of North Yarmouth. The donors or other prominent visitors made complimentary speeches and handed out the prizes. The pupils walked up the aisles bashfully and rather awkwardly to receive the guerdon of their toil and perseverance amidst the plaudits of visitors and of their less fortunate fellow-students.

At the Grammar School there were public "exhibitions," sometimes held in the Court House, at which pupils and ex-pupils recited poetry and sang, and the principal read his reports. At one of these, Warwick Thompson and I sang at a late hour a then popular song. A writer in the "Dispatch," (the late A. J. Allworth probably), said in his account of the affair that two little urchins sang "Rock me to sleep, Mother"; they ought to have been rocked to sleep two hours earlier. On the same occasion, the late Doctors John Fulton and Duncan McLarty, then youths of 20 or upwards, ex-pupils of the school, recited, as I well remember, Campbell's famous dialogue poem: "Lochiel! Lochiel! Beware of the day!"

The Davis farm on which the Central School was built was for many years an open common, on which horse races and fairs were held, cricket, base ball and lacrosse played, and the militia put in their annual drill, consisting simply of lining up and marching without guns or uniforms. These counter-attractions were not favorable to school-attendance. Flogging was a favorite daily pastime of the teachers, and the boys risked it often to see the races or militia-men. In this way the masters were kept up to standard condition. The boys seemed to consider it a part of the day's work, a kind of fate it was useless to resist. Every boy had to put in his full measure of whippings, and the sooner they were over the better for all concerned. Some of the most experienced who used to rub rosin on their hands in anticipation were wont to claim that the ruler, pointer or tawse—whichever weapon of offense was employed by the master or mistress—had thus less effect upon the hand; but there were some skeptics who doubted even the experts.

In my early days boys and girls were in separate rooms. The new Central School in 1866 brought them together in the

highest room; but it was some years earlier that girls were admitted to the Grammar Schools. In the meantime the question was debated in the press, in public meetings and in parliament.

The Common Schools were not free in my time. I remember as a mere infant going to pay for my ticket at Kent's drug store on top of the hill just west of Church street on Talbot. Afterward, we got them at Mr. Morgan's store at the bend of Talbot street in a frame building which is still standing. My father was among the first to agitate for free schools. The schools in St. Thomas were free by popular vote before the statute was passed requiring all to be free throughout the province.

In the days before the great war public sentiment was largely divided along the lines of sympathy with or antipathy towards the United States. Slavery was a question which aroused the passions of Canadians as well as men south of the lakes. The war drew the dividing lines sharp and deep. Every Canadian was either a Northerner or a Southerner, and the battles of the war were refought north of the lakes. I remember the fierce arguments over the famous prize-fight in England between the little English champion, Tom Sayers, and the California giant, John C. Heenan. It was a draw. The papers were full of it for weeks. Bishops, M. P.'s and noblemen jostled costermongers and coal heavers as they crowded round the ring. At the Grammar School, our national spirit was aroused. "Tally" Moore championed the Heenan side. Most of us were for the Englishman, Sayers. Our battles, of course, it may be easily imagined, were more decisive than the one out of which they arose. On the war question, parties at school lined up chiefly, but not altogether, on party lines. Reformers favoring the North and Tories the South. The latter being then as now, largely in the majority, the Reformers generally had the worst of it, when it came to blows, as frequently it did. There was great excitement when one of the big boys, Alex. MacNiel, commonly called Sparta, crossed the lines, and enlisted in the Northern army. He went through the later stages of the war and came back in safety. One of the boys who had attended before my time, "Ocky" Wallace, was killed in the war, and brought back for burial in the old English churchyard.

Human nature has not changed since those earlier days. Boys are boys and girls are girls, now as then. Now as then, the ancient school-tricks of our remotest ancestors are repeated with but slight variations or improvements. Perhaps the ruler, pointer and tawse, as instruments of discipline, are not so much in evidence.

In that particular civilization has scored an advance. Perhaps the pupils are better behaved. Teachers exhibit the same self-sacrificing devotion to duty, the same ardent interest in their work, as in the old days. Canada owes much to the pioneer schoolmasters. Now as then the national welfare depends largely on the work and influence of the teaching profession. It is gratifying to know that they measure well up to their responsibilities. From the very beginnings of Upper Canada, our forefathers were eager to spend and be spent in the cause of education. Shall our descendants say as much for us?

With the history and traditions of "the wonderful century" to inspire us, it is not likely that Ontario will fail to keep pace in educational progress with the onward march of civilization.