

School's story is wreathed in summary of pupils

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This is Part 1 of a two-part article. Part 2 will run Sunday, Oct. 22. - Editor

In the early years of Solano County history, Benicia was at the forefront in developing educational institutions for the children of the first pioneer families.

One school that quickly became well-known for its excellent education was the Benicia Young Ladies Seminary. The school was founded in 1852 by 12 prominent Benicia residents, including Dr. Woodbridge and the Rev. Samuel H. Willey.

According to an early seminary catalog, the founding parents wanted to address the "need for opportunities for the higher education of daughters of the pioneer families of California, without the necessity of making the long ocean voyage to New York and severing family ties."

The school accepted boarding students and day students, who spent between three to five years finishing the academic courses. The high tuition price of \$150 per term for the boarding students, plus an extra \$50 for fuel and laundry and additional charges for classes such as foreign languages and music instruction, made it a rather exclusive institution. Nonetheless, students came from all over Northern California.

Classes began in August 1852, taught by the school's first principal, Miss Susan A. Lord, and the Misses Georgia and Francis Allen, all freshly arrived from the East Coast. By the following spring, Miss Lord was married to Judge Wells and had to be replaced by Miss Jemima N. Hudson. With women still being scarce in society, Miss Hudson, too, did not last long as principal - she married the first superintendent of schools in San Francisco in 1854.

The third principal, Miss Mary Atkins, who purchased the school for \$2,000, stayed for nine years. It was during her time that the school's staff introduced a school newsmagazine titled "The Wreath."

The magazine first was presented to the general public in the second edition of the newly founded "Solano Republican" on Nov. 24, 1855.

The column head read: " 'The Wreath' is the title of a manuscript newspaper, published weekly at the Benicia Seminary. It is edited by Misses M. E. Woodbridge and

E. A. Walsh. Under this head we will publish weekly extracts from that paper, which, we presume, will always be original."

The manuscript text underneath was presented in the form of a letter to "My Dear Friend," dated Benicia, Feb. 8, 1855. The text introduced the school and its students. In the process, this letter/column gives today's readers an interesting and occasionally hair-raising insight in the way a teacher thought and reported on her students.

The first fact that jumps out is that the school educated girls and boys in its classes during the early years:

"My Dear Friend Let me introduce to you our school. We are young ladies, boys and girls, twenty-six in number. As you are particularly interested in children, I will present to you the infant's class first."

The writer, who signs herself "Molly Mudge," possibly the alias for one of the editors, never specified the age of any of the 26 students. By infants, she may have meant kindergarten or first- or second-grade aged students. None are identified as being boarders or day students.

The way her description ran by seating arrangement, one gets the impression that all the students may have been seated in one classroom together.

"We have (text unreadable Olympia?) not the tall mountain, the home of the gods and goddesses of old but a sweet little girl with plump, round dimpled face, large blue eyes, deeply fringed with arched lashes, and she will look in your face so quietly and say, 'kiss me.'

"Abby is next; a little bright, black-eyed girl, with clear, shrill voice and bustling manner a wide awake Californian.

"And here is Jennet, the clear, soft, blue eyes, red-lipped, rosy-cheeked, diffident, pretty liking few and disliking many. Matilda, a wide-awake, black-eyed Spanish girl, is sitting on one of the front seats, she is always busy with her slate, and looks up as you pass with a half-frightened air.

"That blonde beside her, with blue eyes and bright curls, is Mary Kitty. Look at her eyes and you'll surely call her Mary, but at her hair and nought but the name Kitty could ever grace those curls."

The descriptions are fascinating in their use of stereotypes. Both the Spanish and the California girl are "wide-awake" or lively, while the distinction between Spanish and

Californian is notable, too. The Anglo-American girls on the other hand all are labeled rosy-cheeked.

The writer seems to have an affinity for and likes girls. Her characterizations of the boys on the other hand strike us today as strange. Their names are linked to historical figures, and not all comparisons are flattering. While "Molly Mudge" tried to impress her readers with her wit and classical education, one can only imagine a parent's reaction at seeing their son compared to William Rufus:

"But here are Charles one, two and three," she continued, "one more than English history can boast of. Much I hope that Charles the First will not be beheaded, as his namesake of old, or that Charles the Second will not have to dress in woman's clothes and act Betty the cook, to escape his pursuers. Charles the Third is a queer boy, not yet tamed to school life.

"And Freddy, the sparkling, black-eyed boy, who does not like to be outdone by the black-eyed Abby. And Willie, too, with large chestnut eyes; I know not whether he'll be another William the Conqueror, conquering all that comes in his way, or a William Rufus, 'redhaired, fond of low company and deep drinking,' and some day to be shot with an arrow.

"But this little fellow with laughing face and eyes, and determination to go ahead of his brother is Elly, a pleasant name for Elbridge, you know. No doubt he was named after old Governor Eldridge.

"And here is George, I know not whether I, II, III, or IV. If George III, I hardly think he will ever be obstinate enough to cause another Revolutionary War.

"These are our boys, they'll be men some day, and I think noble, generous, self-sacrificing men. We may yet live to see one of them the president of the United States."

From here on, the narrative only mentioned girls. It seems that of the 26 students in February 1855, seven were boys and 19 were girls.

Some of the characterizations of her female students are even more astonishing than are those of the boys, although Molly's outspoken judgmental statements seem to have been acceptable to her readers.

"This large-eyed girl, with beautifully curved lashes, is Arrabella, a timid, unassuming girl of real worth. She is something of a dreamer now, but will soon meet with sober realities enough to awaken every faculty.

"Beside her is Nancy, clear-skin and rosy-cheeked, fair-haired. She loves fun, but is no fun maker. Still she can be a scholar, and would, if she knew the worth of knowledge."

"Molly Mudge" seemed to be aware that her words had power, yet while she hesitated to praise physical beauty, it did not occur to her that some of her character observations were downright hurtful.

"Next comes a black-eyed Mary. Who ever saw one before? But I dare not go any farther, for commendations turns the heads of young ladies; so I'll become a clairvoyant and look upon their minds. Mary's mind is clear, quick and comprehensive; but she's so fond of approbation that it is difficult for her to be perfectly frank and open ."

"This pleasant, modest face belongs to the most timid, retiring, uncomplaining Virginia ever known; she has not a single trait of character like Old Queen Elizabeth's, from whom her name is derived. Her timidity prevents her from being thorough with herself.

"Beside her is her perfect contrast! studious, but easily disheartened; her approbateness so large that she is often unhappy. Her character would be much improved by an intimate acquaintance with the Empress Josephine "

Finally, she seemed to have some favorites. By this point in Molly's narrative, one can surmise that these are the elder girls or "young ladies," likely already in their teens.

"But, this Gracy! Clairvoyant, as I am, I shall need spectacles to read her mind. The glasses read: Approbateness very large, self-esteem large, cheerfulness large, mirth excessive, quick perception, but extremely versatile.

"Back of them sit two well matched, Mary and Maggie. Both are clear-headed, and in time will become good reasoners, a rare trait in woman. One is confident, the other retiring; one fun-making, the other fun-loving, but in a quiet manner; both honorable, conscientious and truthful. Two years of faithful study will make both shine in society."

This last comment is the only time that "Molly Mudge" mentioned character traits in her students that can clearly be admired. And yet, she also added the disparaging statement "a rare trait in a woman."

One has to remember that the school taught courses such as 'Moral Philosophy' and 'Elements of Criticism' to its older students. Principal Mary Atkins was among the first women who received a bachelor's degree. She graduated with honors from Oberlin College in 1845, although like all graduates, she had to find a male person to present her graduation thesis to an audience.

With this in mind, the presentation of Molly Mudge as an official statement of the school and its pupils becomes puzzling. Did Miss Atkins second these types of statements? Did the tone of "The Wreath" change over the next editions?

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