

Portrayals of students offered

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, October 22, 2006

Today we continue to follow the history of "The Wreath," the school paper published by teachers of the Benicia Young Ladies Seminary in 1855.

The paper's first edition was printed on Nov. 24, 1855, in the Solano Republican in the form of a letter to "A Dear Friend." It was signed by "Molly Mudge," likely a pseudonym for one of the editors, Miss E. Woodbridge or Miss E. A. Walsh.

The letter writer gave lengthy descriptions of the children enrolled at the school on Feb. 8, 1855. In the process, we get a glimpse both of the ethnic diversity of the students and the astonishing statements or subtle prejudices displayed by the writer. "Molly Mudge" tried to impress her readers with her wit and classical education, for example linking the boys' names to those of historical figures. One can only imagine a parent's reaction at seeing their son compared to William Rufus. 'Molly' wrote:

"But here are Charles one, two and three - 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 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."

Mostly, her narrative 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 as astonishing as are those of the boys. At the time, Molly's outspoken judgments must 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 considered 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, Molly also seemed to have some favorites. By this point in her 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?

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/334>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/334/>