

Early School Days

MORE FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE PROGRESS OF THE SCHOOLS

Interesting Reminiscences of Mrs. H.S. Burr –The Early River Grove Private School, its Rise and Fall – The Terrible Brain Fever Disease of 1849.

The first of a series of articles on the history of Lansing's schools appeared in the State Republican of last Friday and was read by many with a great deal of interest. The work, as has been mentioned before, is that of C.B. Stebbins, and is correct in all its details. The second article, which appears below, treats on certain private enterprises.

“During the summer of 1847 the people were coming to the new settlement in large numbers, attracted by hope of business or speculation in city lots, the school district having been divided into lots and sold at auction. Quite a number of families had put up temporary dwelling in the vicinity of the junction of Grand and Cedar rivers, on both sides of the Grand. Among these was a young physician, Dr. H.S. Burr¹ and his wife, a lady of culture and enthusiastic in the cause of education. Not the least interesting movement of the time was her starting a school upon her own responsibility, several months before any public action was taken toward a school in the township other than that mentioned in the previous article. Mrs. Burr² is still a resident of the city, and upon solicitation has furnished the following graphic description of her romantic and energetic enterprise:

“I came to Lansing (then called Michigan (in August 1847. The school section had been platted a few weeks before and the lots appraised. River street was the only open street from upper town to the capitol grounds and on this street my husband and I purchased a lot. It was situated on the bank of Grand river and covered with a fine growth of Maple trees. We built for ourselves a pretty little house of clean, fragrant pine boards while the work of building our permanent home was under way.

“The forest extended all around us, but as the underbrush had been cleared away, it afforded delightful rambles, and availing myself of the company of what ever children I could find, I explored the wood in the capacity of a botanist and artist. Early in September I was called upon by some of their parents with the request that I should open a school. Accordingly, after having made several long benches, under the canopy

¹ Hosea S Burr

² Laura E Burr died in the New Grand Hotel, Lansing Mi on May 18, 1900. After the death of her husband she devoted herself to art and was an artist and teacher of painting. She taught art class in Washington, Chicago and many other cities across the United States. She is buried at Mt Hope Cemetery.

of the trees our school was begun. There were none pupils on opening day, the Gouchers, Hunts, and Dearing children. The season was fine, and the weather warm until late October. Occasionally we were obliged to go into our little board house, where we were very closely packed. Before Christmas day, however, we were nicely settled in a commodious apartment in our new house.

“On Christmas day my school numbered eighty pupils. Miss Delia Ward, now Mrs. Mortimer Cowles,³ was my assistant and my husband coming in at 4 o’clock p.m. to teach the pupils music and to close the school. I taught A,B,C’s and algebra, English, Latin and French. The River Grove School was our name. The tuition was \$3 per quarter of twelve weeks—all grades the same.

“In January, 1849, my school was brought to a close by the appearance of the epidemic to which our physician gave the name brain fever.⁴ Its visitation was so sudden and its attacks so fatal that we became a terror stricken community. The legislature, which had just convened, disbanded. Several of my pupils were among the first victims. My husband, Dr. H.S. Burr, after a few weeks of unparalleled effort as a physician to cope with the disease, was himself stricken down with it and died on April 15, 1849: and the River Grove school, which in the confidence of my young years, I believed to be enduring, and in time might vie with the Troy and other institutions of learning had only this ephemeral existence.

Besides Mrs. Burr’s school, in the summer of 1848 William Sprague has a school for a few months, with thirty of forty pupils, in a log house, a few rods east of Washington avenue, on Main street. The school was supported in part by subscription and partly by tuition.

End of Part Two

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³ Lizzie B Cowles

⁴The ‘Brain Fever’ could have been either Encephalitis or Meningitis.