

MESOPOTAMIA

The Alpha Omega Chapter, Alpha Delta State, of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, an honorary women educators' group, in cooperation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, presents a brief history of Mesopotamia and its schools.

The State of Connecticut sold its Western Reserve lands in 1796 without providing any kind of school fund. As soon as the pioneers got themselves comfortably housed and some land under cultivation they made provision for educating their children.

Schools were generally conducted on the tuition plan and only parents who could pay could send their children. Teachers received 75¢ to \$2.00 a week and wages were often in barter, including boarding around in the pupils' homes for a living.

In 1798 Pierpont Edwards, a wealthy citizen of Connecticut, paid \$2,500 for a five-mile square of wilderness in the Western Reserve. The land lay west, and was later aptly named biblically, Mesopotamia -- the pioneers believing this distinctive name would forever safeguard the town's identity.

In the spring of 1799 young John Stark Edwards, with Pierpont's son, just out of college, journeyed alone on foot, carrying an axe and knapsack, across the Pennsylvania frontier and felled the first tree upon his father's land. His enthusiasm for getting a settlement started prompted him to offer a hundred acres of free land to the first five families to come and stay five years and fifty acres to the first five single men.

Unlike many of the townships in the south, the early settlers were mostly from New England. From Connecticut came Hezekiah Sperry with his family of four sons and nine daughters, initiating immediate thought for future schooling, of course. Charlotte Guild, was the first pioneer child born in Mesopotamia of Otis and Lois Guild, who received the second plot of freeland. She was to be, twenty odd years later, one of the area's most industrious teachers. She built a monument for herself of good deeds, with excitement for cards and spinning, teaching, reading, and expert horsemanship. She was often seen riding a horse to school, one so spirited that most women and some men could not bear to ride, and in front of her she carried two children with another on behind.

Additional consideration for education was given with the arrival of Seth Tracey and his six children. He was given the third plot of land in 1801, and in 1803, offered a room of his house for the first school, which was taught by Samuel Forward. The next year Samuel Higles was the teacher, however, and the third teacher was Jerusha Guild.

By 1806 time could be taken from the task of erecting stable housing and cultivating adequate land to build a suitable school house on the northern part of Seth Tracey's farm. Linus Tracey, a young man scarcely out of his teens, with outstanding native intelligence, was a most admired and respected teacher and part time storekeeper. All of his life the townspeople relied on him for information and advice.

The first schoolhouses, often times, were log cabins, usually an old one some thrifty farmer had abandoned for more comfortable quarters. At first, the windows were of copy book paper pasted together and given a little transparency with an application of bear's grease. There were frequent notes of the pupils' hieroglyphics thus clearly outlined in the windows. The scholars sat on split log benches without backs, and the desks, ranging around the walls, were hand hewn slabs held up by wooden pegs wedged between the logs.

Fremont Long, of the Mesopotamia – Middlefield region, told the story of his first day of school on one of those benches. He was five years old and begged to go to school with his older brothers. The schoolmaster frowned upon the presence of younger children at school. After some hours, Fremont began to find it hard to sit still. The teacher happened to be sharpening a quill with his pen knife when he noticed the "wiggler". Fixing an irascible eye on the child, he bid him to be quiet or he would knife him. To lend emphasis to his threat he flung the open penknife so the blade buried itself in the logs back of the desk, not many inches from Fremont's land.

In those pioneer days, even the trip to and from school presented problems. Children often had only blazed trails by which to find their way. Hazel Clark, a native authority on Mesopotamia history, relates how her grandfather, in the 1840's, carried hot baked potatoes to keep his hands warm, then buried the potatoes in the ashes in the school fireplace until lunch.

Mary Hamilton, a young teacher in the vicinity then, rode her pony to school. She often stopped by Indians who called her "pretty squaw". But the fear of her father prevented them from harming her.

The "boarding around" from house to house also had its drawbacks. It is a well known fact among historical readers that lice and itch were common among the families. Often there was no spare bed, so the teacher slept with one of the children. For this Lydia Stone, another area teacher, could only be thankful when one night she awoke scratching, and by the light of the moon, saw an Indian in the room. Quickly she thought out a plan to save herself and catch the Indian. She pinched the child who was sleeping in the bed with her until it cried out. Then she offered to get the child a drink of water. Running quickly downstairs, she told her father, who with help, went up and caught the Indian. However, the Indian pretended to be drunk, watched his chance, and escape into the woods.

In the middle 1800's Singing Schools for education in music were a leading feature. Adults and children, alike, were taught notes and elocution and really enjoyed their music together. In Mesopotamia a post Civil War Band and Singing School was initiated and taught by Alfred English, a young black man who had run away from his slave master and come home with a Mespo soldier. In a few brief months he learned to read, write a beautiful flowing hand and read music. He was a brilliant, inspiring singing teacher and band master, beloved and long remembered by everyone in town.

The 1870's brought a deterioration of the singing schools into money making affairs for stray musicians who came to town. They got the children all excited and ended with a spectacular home talent show but little real musical education was achieved.

About this time (1870's) Mesopotamia debating societies were at their peak. One crisp winter day at the Coffee Corners District School, under the able young teacher, Harley Woodford, the subject assigned was "Which is more beautiful, nature or art?" Art was ahead. Then a burly, rough and ready young student flung in what he was sure would carry the winning punch. "Without a doubt, nature is more beautiful. What could be more beautiful than woman in her nude form?" Hilarity closed the debate and has trickled down the whole century.

In this same little school at Coffee Corners, a decade later, careful, earnestly determined, Miss Florence Shearer presided. Through much persuasion and dedicated planning, she got money and purchased a set of colorful roll-up maps for the schoolhouse walls. The following spring the boys in her school spent their noon and recess times building a hut-playhouse out of various sticks and stones and materials at hand. It was located just down over a bank from the school, out of the teacher's sight. But the boys described it to her in glowing terms, asking if they might borrow the maps to hang up in it. Impressed that they would want to study the maps during their playtime, Miss Shearer did not suspect that their sole purpose was to make fine walls for their playhouse. She even granted them permission to keep the maps overnight. The next morning revealed the maps torn to tatters! The hut had been built in a pig lot and the pigs had taken over during the night.

There were several district schools used over the early years in Mesopotamia territory with various names attached to each – Coffee Corners, Town Line School, Mesopotamia Academy, and etc. In 1882, the old frame school house was called "Pleasant View Institute" and remained in operation until the present brick building was readied in 1922. Board minutes, date 1892, provide insight and smiles as one reads the following excerpts --

May 21, 1892 – The school board hired Mr. S.J. Callender as principal for the year 1892-93 and agreed to pay \$650.00 and half of the foreign tuition fee. He is to do janitor work.

Tuition established for upcoming fall term

Primary Dept	\$2.00
Common English	\$3.00
Higher English with Math	\$4.00
Higher English with Math, Latin, German, or Greek	\$5.00

June 4, 1892 - Board issued the following orders on the treasurer for the term just completed.

\$38.00 - Mary E. Wager for teaching
66.00 - Charles L. Parker for teaching
54.00 - For teaching music – Mrs. L. Peck
5.00 - Address given by Professor Morffard
2.00 - Two dozen erasers

In every era of Mespo's history there were teachers with a gifted touch – like Cora Jenkins. In the 1914 melee of centralizing schools there were many young children in the area overwhelmed by the "crowds of children". Miss Jenkins, with her unspoken, comforting nature and her wheezy little old pump organ, taught songs and studies as the sun shone through the window onto her red-gold hair. She was not an extremely pretty woman, but her personality was so shined with the love of God that she transformed learning into exciting participation.

Many events and persons could be added to update this history. But the basic foundation, first initiated with the pioneers' arrival in 1799 and the "happenings" through the early 1900's still remain of prime importance. School bells continue to ring out for elementary students at the red brick school building erected in 1922, and many of the first school houses are still intact, now homes or parts of other existing buildings. They are symbols of those early "Mespo Days" and the school's essential part in establishing and developing a unity within the community.

This script by Shirley F. Price, narration by Gene Roberts. These programs were prepared by Delta Kappa Gamma Society in cooperation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation to promote a better understanding of the history of the townships of Trumbull County with a focus on early education and the role of the woman educator.