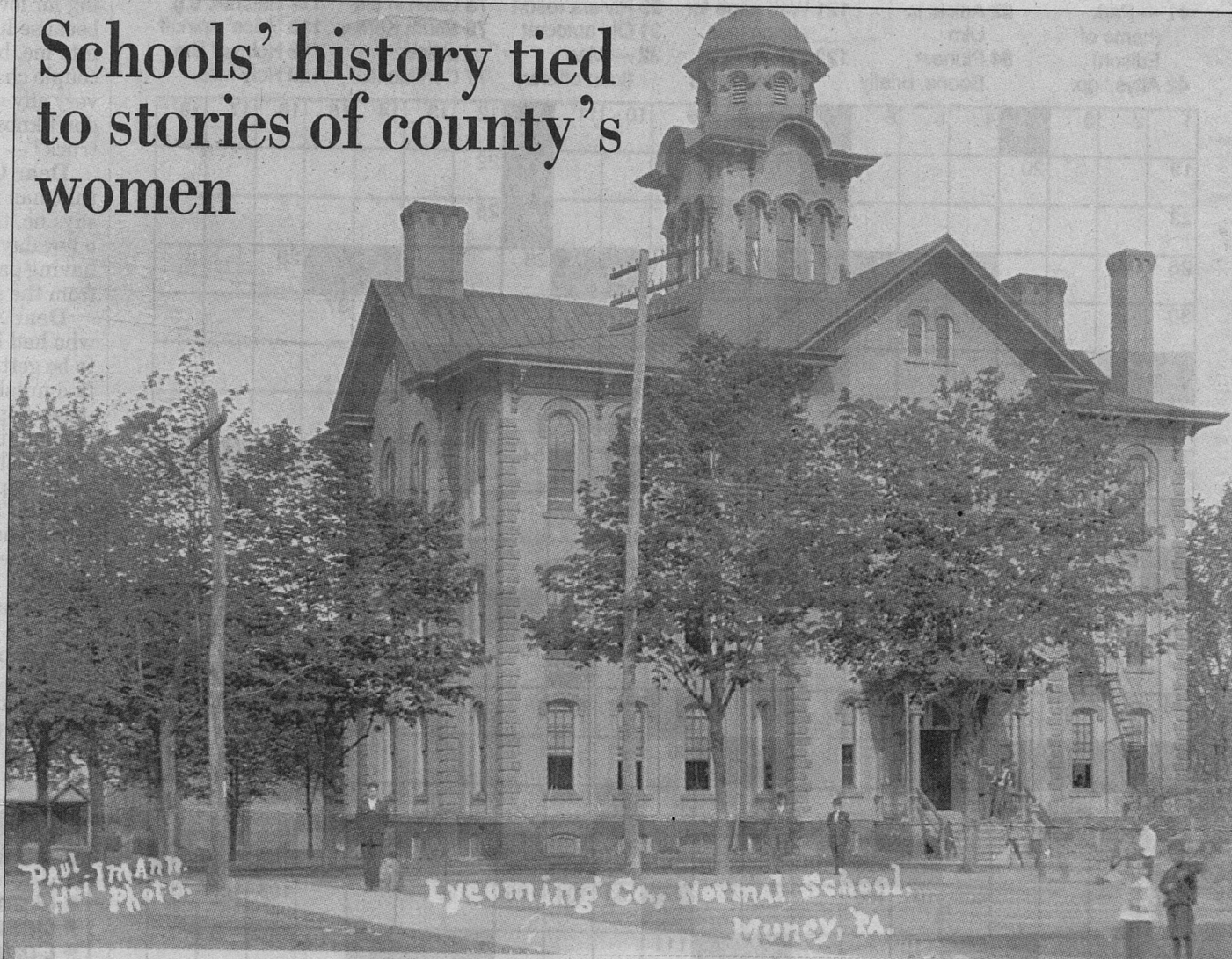


Schools' history tied to stories of county's women



After being founded in Montoursville, the Lycoming County Normal School relocated to a Muncy building built in 1877.

IMAGE PROVIDED

Back to Normal

By MARY SIEMINSKI
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In the 10 years of writing this column, we have profiled several young women who attended “the Normal.” With a little research, we determined that this would have been the Lycoming County Normal School, located first in Montoursville and then in Muncy. Among the young women are Jennie Sweely Ball, Minnie Viola Taylor and Susan Heim Little.

Nineteen-year-old Jennie Sweely from Montoursville recorded in her 1868 diary that she taught at the Jefferson School in Williamsport on Washington Boulevard. She was also enrolled in teacher training courses in Williamsport and at the Montoursville Normal School. The Normal School at the time was located at the corner of Montour and Jordan streets, just a block from her family home on Broad Street. Jennie graduated from the Normal in June 1870, as did her sister Clara. After Jennie married George Ball of Balls Mills and gave up teaching, Jennie’s younger sister Ada, also a Normal School graduate, boarded with her and taught at the one-room school in Balls Mills.

In 1891, after completing eight years at Beech Grove School in Cogan House Township, Minnie Taylor enrolled in the Muncy Normal School, completed a summer course and earned a temporary teaching certificate. She began teaching at the Buckhorn Mountain School just before her sixteenth birthday. She later graduated from Dickinson Seminary (now Lycoming College) and Syracuse University. She was a teacher, a missionary in Chile, a social worker in Williamsport, and, for three years, the Dean of Women at Dickinson.

Susan Heim was from a Dunkard family in Blooming Grove and attended the one-room brick schoolhouse

Lycoming County Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT



on Quaker Hill. She enrolled in the Muncy Normal School, graduating in 1893 when she was 20. She was then hired to teach school in Picture Rocks. There she met and, after a long courtship, eventually married the noted local landscape artist John Wesley Little.

What is a Normal School

The term “normal school” originated in the early nineteenth century. It came from the French *Ecole normale*, which translates as “standard school” or “model school.” In the United States, normal schools were established chiefly to train elementary-school teachers for the public schools that had been established in Pennsylvania by the Free Public School Act of 1834.

No training was required to teach in these public schools. In the rural one-room schools, often the “smartest” graduate of what would be eighth grade was appointed to be the teacher for the younger children. Most often, this student would be a young woman, since the boys were already working on the farms or lumbering.

For a detailed and well-illustrated study of the one-room schools in Lycoming County, read *The One-Room School: Lycoming County’s Legacy*, by the Junior League of Williamsport. It is available online as part of the Lycoming County Women’s History Project.

Normal School Act

The Normal School Act of 1857 created 12 normal school districts, spread geographically across the state. Some schools were public and others were privately owned. The length and course of study varied greatly across the 12 normal schools. In 1911 the Commonwealth purchased all of the normal schools.

According to Lycoming County historian John Meginness, “before the establishment of [the Lycoming County Normal School], the teachers of the county had no acquaintance with the theory of teaching, or school government, and the advancement that was made was slow and unsatisfactory. . . . The Normal teaching presented new methods and theories, which were carried into the work of teaching, and the progress that was made was gratifying to all friends of popular education” (*History of Lycoming County Pennsylvania*, 1892).

The state normal schools in time evolved into state teacher’s colleges and then state colleges. In 1982, they became state universities, part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education that we know today.

Montoursville Normal School

The Lycoming County Normal School was organized in Montours-

(See SCHOOLS, Page C6)

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(From Page C1)

ville in the spring of 1870 under the leadership of Thomas Gahan, a former county superintendent. Gahan had a "deep-seated desire to and conviction to make, out of rude, uncouth country boys, fine teachers of children," according to historian Eugene Bertin ("Illustrious Names in Muncy's Unique Educational History," reprinted in *History of Muncy* by Thomas T. Taber, 1994).

The school was popular and grew quickly, moving from the four-room high school building to various locations in Montoursville. Graduation exercises were held at the "White Church (Lutheran)" in Montoursville. In just a few years the school had become so large that it was moved to Muncy to

a new building, erected in 1873, that for a time would house both the Normal School and the high school. The Montoursville Normal School closed in 1877.

Muncy Normal School

As the Normal School's reputation grew and the number of students increased, the course of study expanded to include a college preparation course in addition to a teacher training course. Later a business course was added. Some students referred to Muncy Normal as the "Poor Man's College."

In the Normal School catalog for 1913-14, the school is described as "centrally located, and commands a magnificent view of

the entire valley. The Susquehanna Water Gap, six miles below, and the North Mountain, 20 miles in the opposite direction, can be distinctly seen from its upper windows." Also in the 1913-14 school catalog is an estimate of approximate expenses: \$56 per term, including tuition, room and board at a local Muncy home, laundry, and incidentals.

About 1927, after providing higher education for both Lycoming County residents and others from around the district for almost 60 years, the Normal School became a branch of Mansfield State College. For many years, a very loyal alumni association held reunions each year, a number of them organized by 1893 graduate Susan Heim Little.