

Williamsport Women

The school on the hill: 19th-century education for women in Williamsport

By JANET McNEIL HURLBERT

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A 19th-century advertisement for Williamsport Dickinson Seminary (predecessor of Lycoming College) reads: "Ranks among the most progressive and best equipped schools for both sexes. Abreast of the age in all respects." The Seminary had accepted women since the 1830s, although many more attended than graduated.

The young ladies might be named Nettie, Lulu, Sadie or Bessie, and their addresses were often Williamsport, or if they were boarding students, they usually came from central Pennsylvania. Women who attended the school on the hill were among a very small percent of the female population that continued their education beyond high school.

The discussion of educating women, however, was becoming widespread on a nation level as a result of women's contributions to the Civil War effort and the rise of the new middle class. Some activists even questioned why Harvard, Princeton and Yale did not enroll women.

During this critical period in women's education came the fifth president of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary, Dr. Edward Gray, who served from 1874 to 1905. He brought new energy to the campus, not only by installing electricity, but also by his commitment to developing a strong curriculum, enhancing the physical facilities and offering students should well-rounded activities as part of their educational experience.

Young women in attendance had role models in their female instructors. There was also a strong role

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PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown are photos provided by the Lycoming College Archives. Above left, is a portrait of Della McCurray from New Washington, a seminary student in the music department. Above middle, are more students at the seminary. Writing on the back of the photo says standing is Mary L. Campbell, second row, from left, are Anna Blanch Slate, and Jane LeVan Green (end); on the ground is Florence Slate Lyon. Four of the women are not identified. Above right are female members of the junior class in 1895.

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model, albeit a traditional one, in the president's wife. Eva Emery Gray, herself, had graduated from the Seminary. Not only was she a devoted pastor's wife and partner to her husband's presidency, but she also served as the modern equivalent of facilities coordinator and dean of women.

Gray had much to do with building improvements and operations. She also shepherded new organizations that women could join.

One was the Young Women's Foreign Missionary Society to prepare young ladies for their Christian role in future families. On one occasion the group held a Japanese tea at a local minister's home.

Prohibition club

The Dickinson Seminary Prohibition Club hosted events, various choral clubs appeared, and later the YWCA had a presence on campus. On Saturdays, the women students attended short lectures to enhance their cultural awareness. Subjects could be from literature or art, or a special topic might be chosen, such as celebrated women of the French Revolution.

A father could rest assured that his daughter would be safe at the seminary. The school catalog states, "Williamsport is one of the most beautiful and healthy places in the state. It has never been subject to epidemics of any kind."

Gray was a firm disciplinarian and many of the rules applied to both sexes. Students must attend chapel every day and church twice on Sunday. There were to be no games of chance, indecent language, no smoking on school property, no alcohol consumption, no visiting hotels, no damage to property, no firearms, and no room visitations. Students were to bring simple, sturdy clothing and an umbrella.

However, women had less freedom to leave campus and men and women could not be in the same room without an instructor present.

They could not ride or walk together unchaperoned. Later a rule was added that men on the lawn were not allowed to talk with ladies at their windows; obviously there had been problems. The catalog boasted that men and women actually had less time to be alone together than if they were in their own homes. Reality intruded on this idyllic scene — Gray had many conduct problems involving

males and females finding ways to spend time together unchaperoned.

A majority of the female students enrolled in the strong music and art programs. In 1876, the drawing and painting department had 33 women and three men. Curriculum descriptions illustrate that there was a general feeling that women's minds were different, even if not inferior.

A student could enroll in the normal English curriculum to meet the growing need for teachers. There was a classical department for young men preparing for professional life, and "young ladies who aspire to intellectual culture."

These young ladies, however, were excused from taking Greek. There was a science and literature curriculum in which the ladies could substitute drawing and painting for calculus and analytical geometry. Later in the century, a new business program described courses designed for men only.

Literary Societies

Much of the social and intellectual life outside of the classroom revolved around three literary societies. The women's group was called Tripartite Union Society. A typical meet-

ing involved prayer, society business and debate. As the women began to debate, their topic could be stereotypical, such as "A doctor is better for a husband than a lawyer," but they did not shy away from more substantive topics, such as the hot 19th-century subject: "Resolved: That Volapuk should become the universal language."

Male students gave enthusiastic credit to women for organizing social events. For example, the ladies put together a Halloween party and offered games such as pin the tail on the donkey and fortune telling. For the senior picnic, students boarded a railcar and spent the day out of town playing bingo and croquet, climbing rocks and swinging in hammocks, with ice cream and lemonade to top off the day.

Never fear, chaperones were listed as present. There was also the occasional taffy pull or musical soiree. On Chestnut Day, when classes were canceled, students went to Sylvan Dell for a day of fun.

Glass Ceiling

Reality surfaces when a student editorial declares that "The world does not ask what men know, but what they do."

The use of the word "men" really does mean just that — men. The glass ceiling was reached in 1890, when the female students wanted to change the rules and appoint a female editor for the school's version of a student newspaper.

It would be ten more years before this would happen. Alumni reports show the young men becoming ministers, reading the law or entering the business world. Some of the women became teachers or educational administrators.

A few were appointed as missionaries to foreign lands. Most became wives and mothers, certainly richer from their seminary education and more prepared for the world that was slowly opening up to them, to their daughters and granddaughters.

Hurlbert, professor emeritus for library services at Lycoming College, is the guest author for this month's Williamsport Women column. The column is regularly written by Mary Sieminski, a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. The column is published the second Sunday of each month. For comments on the column, email life@sungazette.com.