CHAPTER XI

WISCONSIN AND THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATION

The first school in Wisconsin is said to have been an Episcopal Missionary School for the whites and half-breeds of Green Bay. It was started in 1823 by the Reverend Eleazar Williams who claimed to be the lost Dauphin of France, son of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI who were beheaded during the Reign of Terror.

A little later, in 1829, a school was opened for the white children of Mineral Point. A log cabin was built for it, with a big fireplace and split logs for floor and seats. The school was open until 1832 when people became so much excited and alarmed over the Black Hawk War that they kept their children at home.

It was two years before the school reopened.

According to one writer, this school at Mineral Point was the first free public school in the territory. "Public in that the village government supported the school for the benefit of all the children within its jurisdiction." According to other authorities, Kenosha, (then Southport), established the first free public school in 1845.

When Wisconsin was still a part of Indiana Territory the federal government had given to the territory the sixteenth section of land in each township, the rents from which, or the interest upon the proceeds of the sale of which, were to be used for the support of schools. In 1837, the territory of Wisconsin required every township having a school section of land, and having twenty or more electors, to hire a teacher for at least three months, paying his wages out of the rents coming in from the school lands. If this were not sufficient, the expense of upkeep was to be paid by a tax upon those whose children attended school, in proportion to the number in school. Those who had no children were excused from the tax.

In 1839 the legislature authorized each county to levy a tax of not more than one-fourth of one per cent to be spent in building or supporting schools. But this was not enough. The local districts were constantly coming to the territorial legislature asking for permission to levy an extra tax to build a school house.

Of course this couldn't last. With a rapidly growing population over a territory the size of Wisconsin it was not practical for every little community to run to the territorial legislature for permission to build a school house. Colonel Michael Frank of
Southport (now Kenosha), a member of the territorial legislature, pointed out a better way. He said that local communities should be permitted to levy a tax sufficient to build and maintain schools. Moreover, instead of having those who sent children to school pay most of the teacher’s salary, he believed that the whole community should be taxed enough for the purpose, and the schools should then be free to all children.

There was much opposition to Colonel Frank’s plan. It was considered radical and impractical. When he saw that it would not pass applying to the whole territory, Colonel Frank changed it so that it would apply only to Southport. But even that was too strong for the legislature. They attached to it a local referendum, and then passed what was left of it. Thus the people of Southport were given permission to vote on the question as to whether they would tax themselves to establish free public schools.

The law took effect on February 24, 1845, and Southport was given until May 1 to act upon it. Colonel Frank hurried home to work on public opinion. Fortunately he was editor of the Southport Telegraph, and by using the paper and distributing leaflets he reached most of the people with arguments for the free public school.

The first meeting called to vote on the law broke up without a vote. Feeling against the measure was strong.

One excited citizen exclaimed, “What? I be taxed to pay for the education of the Dutch and Irish! Never!”

Strangely enough, even the poorer citizens with the largest families were somehow or other persuaded that a free public school would be a bad thing, and the majority vote was against that dangerous institution. However, the friends of the free school did not give up. They kept on working among the voters; called a second meeting, and won their point.

So Southport went to work and made model public schools, and soon had the reputation of being the most thoroughly organized school in the West. The school was visited by committees from Racine, Chicago, and other cities, who came to take note of its methods and management.¹

In 1848 Wisconsin became a state. The early teachings of Colonel Frank had borne fruit by this time, for the constitution directed the legislature to provide for free public schools all over the state; established two state school funds, one for the benefit of the university and one for the common schools, academies and normals; and required local communities to levy a tax to equal at least the income from the state funds for the support of the public schools. These measures were not passed without opposition.

The strongest opposition to public schools, according to Duncan McGregor, came from the lead region, which was largely settled by people of southern birth, who came prejudiced in favor of private schools, and who looked forward hopefully to the time when they could organize and support their own academies or colleges. On the side of education at public expense were found the few who had hailed from the eastern, especially from the New England states.

The Constitutional Convention discussed the question whether schools should be open free of charge to people up to twenty years of age, or only to the age of sixteen. One member considered it improper to tax the people for the education of men and women. If persons over that age had not sufficient ambition to defray the expenses of their own education, the people should not be taxed for them to be educated. Opposed to this view, another pointed out that in a new country the early settlers had little

¹ S. Y. Brande, the Evolution of the Free School at Kenosha. Columbian History of Education. ² The Schools of Iowa County and Mineral Point. Columbian History of Education in Wisconsin. p. 578.
chance of schooling, and often came to the age of sixteen almost unschooled. One mem-
ber brought out what an advantage it would have been to him had there been free
schools when he was young. He told how, at the age of sixteen, he was apprenticed,
and at twenty-one he was turned loose upon the world without an education. If in
the days of his youth there had been provision similar to that which it was now en-
deavored to engrat in the school article, it would have been stipulated in his indentures
that he should be sent to school for some portion of the time, because this would cost
his employer nothing except the loss of a portion of his time.

Following the adoption of the Constitution a system of free schools over the entire
state was provided by the legislature of 1848. It was not until 1879, however, that
children were compelled to attend them. A law of that year, (ch. 121, p. 155) required
that all children between the ages of seven and fifteen should be sent to some schools
either public or private, for at least twelve weeks in each school year. It seems
like a long road from that standard to the present law which requires school attendance
five days a week for nine months in the year until completion of the eighth grade or of
nine years in school; and after that completion of high school, or half-time to the age
of sixteen and eight hours a week to the age of eighteen. Education has gained ground
step by step. Each step has meant a hard struggle.

By the time the Constitution was adopted there were many private schools in the
state. Most of these were supported by religious congregations. There were Presby-
terian schools, Baptist schools, Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, and every other sort
of denominational school. They were of three main types: common schools for chil-
dren, middle schools known as academies for youth; and colleges.

One by one these three types of schools have been provided at public expense. First
the common schools were established as free public institutions, as we have seen.
Next came college training. The state constitution adopted in 1848 provided for a
state university to be supported by public funds. Last of all came the middle schools,
which postponed entrance to college by offering further training than the eight grades
could give.

Today every city in the state has a great institution known as the high school.
Some of the buildings are magnificent. They have more equipment and a broader course
than any college in the country seventy-five years ago—much more than the University
of Wisconsin in the first year of its life. Most people who come to the University now
have already had four years of high school equal in many cases to four years in the old
time college. In the early days, they either went from the city grades or the country
schools for a few months or a year or two to some private academy or preparatory
school, and came from there to the state University; or they came directly from the
graded or country school to the University, and went into the preparatory department
for a few months or a year or two. In 1857 the first pupils were graduated from a
public high school in Wisconsin; ten “young ladies and gentlemen” from the high school
at Racine. The free public high school did not really flourish until the 80's and 90's.
It is in the twentieth century that they have really become institutions for the mass
of the people.

Before the high school became popular, several teacher training schools had been
established by the state. One by one different communities have asked the state to
give them a normal school, until now there are nine in the state, besides Stout Insti-
tute for the training of the vocational teachers.

In addition to these ten normal schools or teacher's colleges in the state, there are
now more then twenty rural normals in as many different counties, supported partly
by the state and partly by the county. They are engaged in the training of teachers for the one room country schools.

An important part of Wisconsin's educational system are her public libraries and the great travelling library which serves the homes and communities and schools which are not near to a public library. With real Wisconsin thoroughness, a school for training librarians has been established as a part of the state university. This school which ranks as one of the two or three great library schools of the country, trains librarians for Wisconsin and for every state of the union and many foreign countries.

We have already told about the development of agricultural education in the state. We shall give the next two chapters to the stories of the University of Wisconsin and of the part-time schools of the state.

The Manitowoc high school. A modern free educational institution.