THE BACKGROUND OF THE ADULT EDUCATION MOVEMENT*

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The fact that throughout almost the whole nineteenth century constant efforts have been made to build up a system of higher education suited to the needs of adult men and women suggests that they are not the outcome of a merely evanescent interest or fashion, but are founded on permanent needs which, when disappointed in one direction, seek satisfaction in another.¹

Adult education is not a new concept. Since the beginning of recorded history, we have evidence of men who have learned throughout their individual lifetime, and have used numerous informal methods to perpetuate culture. But formal institutional adult education in any large scale is relatively modern. The development of various programs has been marked by diversity due to the changing interests and the variety of needs of adults. Adult education has been identified with the institutional organizations which have been created within society to provide meaningful learning experiences for individuals and groups. These institutions and agencies of education for adults have usually been organized so that persons at the same stage of development or having similar interests may receive instruction efficiently and effectively. In many ways, there is a similarity in the programs of the different countries, since the basic needs of adults are similar in all countries and at specific stages in man’s development. In their particulars, however, the adult educational agencies and institutions of each country tend to reflect the distinctive culture of the country in which they have developed. At times, for example, adult programs in various countries have been so dominant that persons have identified adult education with some particular institution, as in the case of the Danish folk high schools.²

Progress and growth in education have developed on four basic levels in our society: the elementary, secondary, higher, and adult educational levels. The progress of each has been dependent on and interwoven with the growth of the others. For example, the leaders of adult education in the lyceums in America during the first half of the 19th century were proponents of more adequate elementary education. This paper will deal with the adult educational aspects

* Paper read at the 91st annual meeting of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters.
only, since the other levels of education have been treated exhaustively in numerous scholarly studies. To examine a few of the highlights of the institutions of adult education in England and America will provide a background for understanding the movement.

*English Heritage in Adult Education*

Although the growth in educational opportunities progressed slowly through the centuries, during and following the industrial revolution there began to appear in Britain indications that education was a privilege desired by more than the elite. A British historian, Robert Peers, contends that the movement for adult education was part of the revolution which transformed a country of small scale craftsmen and farmers into a great industrial democracy. He further ties this economic trend to the religious awakening of the mid-eighteenth century, and both of these movements to the dissolution of the old social order in England and the drift of population to the towns.

*Mechanics' Institutes.* Dr. George Birkbeck, founder of the Mechanics' Institute movement, was Professor of Natural Philosophy at Anderson University in Glasgow in 1799. He had become aware of the unsatisfied desire for knowledge of the workers while supervising mechanics in the production of apparatus required for his demonstrations. Birkbeck was so taken with the interest shown by the workmen that he proposed the establishment of a Mechanics' Class. It was an immediate success. In 1804 Birkbeck moved to London, but the work was carried on by his successor, Dr. Ure.

*People's Colleges.* In 1842, an independent minister, the Rev. R. S. Bayley, criticized the shortcomings of the Mechanics' Institutes in meeting the needs of working men for higher education. Bayley recognized that many workingmen were not ready for higher studies, and that provision needed to be made for more elementary subjects. He succeeded in establishing a People's College in Sheffield to provide general education of a humane character. The number of students at this College rose rapidly until, in 1849-50, there were 630 enrolled. The London Working Men's College was founded by a group of Christian Socialists in England in 1854. This institution was a practical experiment in social reform undertaken by Frederick Denison Maurice and his colleagues.

*University Extension.* Frederick Maurice intended that the Working Men's College should work closely with the existing institutions such as the universities. It was his hope that the Universities would accept persons coming from the colleges (such as the

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Working Men's Colleges), as they would from any other, and that they would grant students their degrees, through examinations, once the work was completed. Maurice felt confident that no fee would stand in the way of working men obtaining the same advantages as their countrymen possessed. Unfortunately, Maurice's hopes for adult students to go from the London College on to Oxford and Cambridge did not come to realization.

There have been two rather distinct approaches to the conception of University Extension as it was carried on in England. One has been that mainly associated with Cambridge, which concerned itself mostly with the promotion of serious, systematic study. The other, which is characterized mostly by the Oxford movement in university extension, has been the idea of the stimulation of intellectual life at numerous levels of adult development. The university extension lectures tended to accomplish the second objective more successfully than they did the first. The later developments of colleges and centers grew out of a desire for opportunities for more continuous and systematic study than was offered in university extension lectures. One of the leading examples of the expression of the Oxford point of view in university extension was the work of Canon Barnett at Toynbee Hall.

Toynbee Hall. Toynbee Hall was founded in 1883, and expressed a new recognition among the universities of their responsibilities to the underprivileged. Canon Barnett brought many men from the Colleges of Oxford to Toynbee Hall, where they worked in the heart of the slums of London in both social settlement house and educational endeavors. Later movements in adult education in England and America took inspiration from the efforts of these idealistic young scholars. The very idea of tutorial classes grew out of the experience of Canon Barnett in his extension lectures at Toynbee Hall.

Adult Education in the United States

The definitive study of the origins of university extension in this country was published by Herbert B. Adams in 1900. In it he pointed out the interrelationship of democratic traditions of education between England and the United States. England, perhaps, received impulses in the direction of democratic education from the American and French revolutions, but, in later stages, the role of leadership was reversed. The growth in educational democracy was

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an outgrowth of the pioneer influence of the English leaders of
social enlightenment and was closely tied in with the reform move-
ments in British politics, particularly with the extension of suffrage.

Organized adult education in the United States began in colonial
days. It was a fruit of the Protestant revolt of the 16th century
and the general awakening of Europe taking place at that time. An early form was the proprietary school which taught vocational
subjects and usually met in the evening. Arithmetic and language
were staple parts of the curriculum. With the continued influx of
early settlers from Europe there developed the need for a culture
which would bring cohesiveness to this new land. The founders of
the new nation realized that political independence was not suf-
cient, and that there must be, in addition, an informed electorate.
There thus ensued during the early part of the 19th century in the
United States a number of loosely organized efforts in adult educa-
tion, many of them unrelated to each other.

_Lyceums_. One of the most important of these individual group
efforts was the lyceum. Farmers, mechanics, and other groups with
some formal education organized small local associations for the
purpose of self-improvement. They were concerned not only with
their own improved learning, but with the development of a public
school system. Josiah Holbrook was a leader in the establishment of
lyceums in New England, the first of them being held at Millbury,
Massachusetts, in 1826.

The lyceum had as its purpose self-culture, instruction in speech,
debate, and discussion of common public interests. These town lyce-
ums grew rapidly, and by 1839 some three thousand existed
throughout the country. Through the years they became potent in-
fluences in promoting public education, and many participants
assumed educational leadership. These groups had among their
number some of the leading intellectual figures of the time, includ-
ing Henry Ward Beecher, Wendell Phillips, Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Bayard Taylor, Horace Greeley, Frederick
Douglass, and George William Curtis. The most famous was
Abraham Lincoln.

But like so many ventures of adult education, which tend to be
 episodic, the lyceum waned just before the beginning of the twen-
tieth century. During the period that the lyceums were gaining
strength, there were developing other agencies of adult education.

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4 Cubberley, Ellwood P. _Public Education in the United States_. Boston: Houghton,
6 Adams, op. cit., p. 298. Also see American _Journal of Education_ XIV, October,
1826, 533; and Carl Bode, _The American Lyceum_ (New York: Oxford University Press,
7 Cyril O. Houle, _op. cit._, p. 185.
Some of these grew out of the interests of those active in the lyceums—museums, libraries, lecture series, mechanics’ institutes, and evening schools with public support. While the lyceums tended to decline, many of the other institutions tended to become permanent. For example, 1833 saw the first tax-supported library in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

The Chautauqua Institution. The lyceums had given Bishop John H. Vincent an example of what could be done in adult education. In 1874 Vincent and his colleagues embarked on an expansion of a Sunday school association and established the Chautauqua Institution. The name “Chautauqua” can be considered both as a place and as an idea. Bishop Vincent chose, as the place, Lake Chautauqua in southern New York. The idea was that annually, during the summer months, thousands of persons should go there to hear lectures and music, and to attend courses of instruction especially developed for Sunday school teachers. Vincent’s idea was that all learning was sacred, and that the secular life should be pervaded by the religious spirit. This spirit he meant to achieve through the Chautauqua Institution. His early emphasis was on the training of Sunday school teachers, but he soon added to the usual Biblical study in the curriculum a variety of additional subjects: literature, languages (ancient and modern), history, art, science, music, elocution, and physical culture.

Chautauqua offered one of the earliest correspondence study programs in America. The early program was carried on through the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (known as C.L.S.C.), founded in 1878. Then, as now, C.L.S.C. provided a number of “reading courses” available by mail. In 1883 a program leading to a diploma through correspondence study was also added to Chautauqua, so that a student could continue his study through the mails. This set a pattern later adopted by university extension when William Rainey Harper founded The University of Chicago in 1892.

The Extension of University Teaching

University extension was another expression of the desire of adults in America for increased enlightenment. History records

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32 Mr. M. E. Sadler, Secretary of the Oxford Delegacy, is quoted as saying that “the phrase ‘University Extension’ seems to have become current in the discussions on University reform during the years immediately preceding 1856.” George Henderson, Report Upon the University Extension Movement in England. Published by order of the Philadelphia Society for the Extension of University Teaching, 1600 Chestnut St., Philadelphia (n.d., ca. 1890), p. 3.
that University extension was first publicly presented in the United States at sessions of the American Library Association at Thousand Islands, New York, in September, 1887. This essentially English system, adapted to local needs in America, was taken up by many public spirited librarians in America in Chicago, St. Louis, and New York.\textsuperscript{13}

In January, 1888, Melvil Dewey, chief librarian of Columbia University, laid before the regents of the University of the State of New York a plan for university extension in connection with public libraries. On May 1, 1891, $10,000 was appropriated for the state organization of university extension. The bill stipulated that no part of the grant should be used for lectures, but should be used "for purposes of organization, supervision, and printing.\textsuperscript{14}

Following the lead of the University of the State of New York, another major educational extension effort in the United States was undertaken by the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching. This Society was organized in Philadelphia in 1890. Public-minded institutions cooperated with able and well trained lecturers (many invited from England), extending their service to the cause of popular education in America. The American Society was supported by subscription, and a periodical, The Citizen and the University Extension, was published to unite and promote the extension movement.

For a decade the Society flourished. The University of the State of New York reported in June, 1899, that the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching gave lecture courses in fourteen places in Philadelphia and in twenty-nine different towns throughout Pennsylvania and in states near by.\textsuperscript{15} The activities of this society, however, began to wane after the turn of the century.

\textit{Other Extension Ventures}

During the period of 1880 to 1900 many efforts were made to transplant to the United States the forms of university extension which had proved successful in England. In 1892 at a national congress held for those interested in the extension movement, it was reported that in the past four years twenty-eight states had organized extension programs. The University of Wisconsin listed a group of extension lecturers as early as 1890–91 and offered them to groups off the resident campus.\textsuperscript{16} Morton reports that by the turn of the century, however, university extension ventures had dimin-

\textsuperscript{13} J. N. Larned, "An Experiment in University Extension," \textit{Library Journal} (March-April, 1888), p. 75.
\textsuperscript{14} Adams, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 303.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 307.
\textsuperscript{16} Copy in author's files.
ished almost to the vanishing point. Some of the reasons listed for the decline in extension efforts during this period were inadequate financing, unavailability of suitable lecturers, inability of university staffs to understand the interests and capacities of adults, and the great increase of university campus enrollments. By the early 1900's the enrollment bulge of undergraduate day students taxed university facilities and the energies of the faculty, and most faculty members were unwilling to lecture off campus.

The University of Wisconsin and University Extension

The University of Wisconsin pioneered in the development of a general educational outreach in this country, and over the years has been a leader in dynamic programs of adult education and public services. With the appointment of Dr. Charles R. Van Hise as its president in 1903, Wisconsin led among public institutions of higher learning in taking the stored-up knowledge of the university to the people beyond the immediate campus. James Creese, in his book The Extension of University Teaching, has stated that "in the entire history of university extension, no event had more critical importance than the re-establishment of the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin by President Charles R. Van Hise and Dean Louis E. Reber in 1906-07. The revival at Wisconsin led to restoration of partly abandoned extension divisions in universities all over the country, at privately endowed institutions as well as at state universities."¹⁸

Wisconsin has provided education for its adults not only through the University of Wisconsin, but through other institutions. A system of Vocational and Adult Schools was founded through the imaginative leadership of Dr. Charles McCarthy in 1911 and is unique to Wisconsin in its statewide pattern. The Free Library Commission through the vision of Frank A. Hutchins has enriched the enlightenment of adults by more than half a century of services to the people of the state. And the Co-operative Extension Service has carried on a broad program of public service through support by U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the county governments. With the rich heritage and background of adult education in Wisconsin it is hoped that the state will continue to pioneer in creative programs for adults in the decades ahead.
