The Lyceum in the Early West
BY LESLIE H. MEEKS

"Remember that Bayard Taylor will lecture tomorrow night at the city school house and that Horace Greeley will lecture at the same place Saturday night." In these words, quoted from a Middle Western newspaper of more than seventy years ago, there comes to us faintly an echo of a then vigorous educational vogue, the old lyceum. The story of that enterprise, distant ancestor of our immense university extension activities, has many a thrill for the antiquarian, be his chief interest historical, literary, or educational. It is the purpose of this essay to reopen a few of the more piquant pages in the history of the lyceum, particularly as it touched the early Middle West, and to enliven the story with some hitherto unpublished letters of Emerson, Holmes, Bayard Taylor, J. G. Holland, and other celebrities of their time.1

"Remember that Bayard Taylor will lecture." To the tough-sinewed pioneers not many years emerged from the log-cabin era, this announcement must have been more than mildly interesting, at least to the more ambitious among them. Ignorant and gullible though they were as a group, and often immersed in the boiling pot of rabid politics, some longed for refinement and intellectual pursuits and warmly sponsored any movement that appeared to be educational. Their admiration for Taylor and men of his calibre may be judged from this anonymous critical note from the newspaper quoted above:

He is apparently not more than twenty-eight or thirty years of age. [In reality he was thirty-five.] He has a finely shaped head; oval face; broad, full, white forehead; fine, black, glossy hair; delicately arched, slender brows; slightly Roman nose; thin nostril and finely cut lips covered with brown, silky mustachios; eyes that seem black until they look straight into yours, and then you discover that they are that rich, warm brown of which you never see but two or three pairs in a lifetime . . . . Through the whole course of the lecture, but one word, statistics, was imperfectly spoken.

The good woman who wrote this commentary—surely the author was a woman—was evidently captivated by

1The Terre Haute Express, Wednesday, Feb. 1, 1860.
2These hitherto unpublished letters of Emerson, Holmes, Bayard Taylor and others are the property of Miss Margaret Gillum, of Terre Haute, to whose grandfather they were written and by whose courteous permission they are here reproduced. The grandfather, Mr. Joseph Gilbert, was the secretary of the Ulyssian Society, a local literary club active in the 1860's and 1860's.
the personal charm of the lecturer, and doubtless many others among his hearers were similarly affected. To them Taylor was not Socrates, but Adonis. Like the Polchester ladies in Walpole's *The Cathedral*, who spoke glibly of Greek gods though they had never seen one, the pioneers were pathetically laughable in their attempt to appear sophisticated.

But this was not their only reaction. Whereas now adult interest in things cultural may sometimes rise, it is to be feared, merely from a desire to escape being stifled by materialism, seventy years ago it frequently arose from a thirst for the good and the beautiful and from a true passion for learning. The ideas of liberty, equality, and free educational opportunities for all had by 1825 taken a firm hold upon the imagination of the builders of the empire in the West.

What a mixture of sound educational theory and farcical make-believe the old lyceum recalls! What idealistic dreams and what great names! Emerson, Holmes, Bronson Alcott, Edward Everett, Thoreau, Bayard Taylor, Horace Greeley, Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher, James Russell Lowell, Phillips Brooks, Anna E. Dickinson, J. G. Holland—these and many others reached out as lecturers from the older cultural centers of the East to the region north and west of the Ohio.

The lyceum movement was founded in 1826 by Josiah Holbrook, a graduate of Yale. The idea was probably suggested to him by the mechanics' institutes which began in England late in the eighteenth century. He had a vision of an international system of education for adults as well as for adolescents. His plan was to establish an organization that would extend from a national center to the states, and thence to the counties, and on down to every town, district, and village. Membership was voluntary, though the leaders tried to interest farmers, mechanics, teachers, and even women. The word *even* is used advisedly, for this was before the day of women's emancipation. Activities were meant to be patriotic, non-partisan, educationally democratic, benevolent, and Christian. The prime object was the "universal diffusion of knowledge." Annual membership fees were two dollars for adults and one dollar for persons under eighteen years of age. One could have "membership forever" by paying twenty dollars. Every local group was supposed to have weekly meetings with alternate lectures
and debates. Employing agents with managerial powers had charge of activities in given districts.

The chief matters to be promoted were the study of natural history through a central cabinet and a system of exchanges with local museums, the use of apparatus in lectures, the introduction of vocal music into common school education, the study of history and international law, the preservation of records and materials of local history, the establishment of people's colleges, and the provision of textbooks, possibly free, for the public schools. Other aims were the improvement of conversation, the supervision of amusements, the saving of expense, the founding of libraries and museums, and the establishment of seminaries for teachers. One early account of the system states that sometimes women were allowed to instruct in some of these subjects—an amazing concession in 1826. A constitution was drawn up in 1829 by a committee headed by Henry Ware, president of Harvard College, and including Edward Everett.3

The lyceum movement grew rapidly in the West and seemed, at least for a time, to make progress in accordance with the dream of its founder. Cincinnati had an active center by 1830, and Jacksonville, Illinois, became almost a rival in the following year. The Reverend Theron Baldwin, of Jacksonville, said of the beginnings of the lyceum:

Its influence thus far has been very happy... The institution is peculiarly calculated to bring upon common ground the individuals who make up the mixed population of the West and who would scarcely be brought in any other way to harmonize in any one well-directed effort on the subject of general education.4

The first national lyceum convention was held in New York early in May, 1831. Twenty-three delegates attended,

---

3 The following list of references on the lyceum will furnish material on the subject to any reader who may desire to go into it more extensively: Louis J. Albert, "The First Hundred Years," in Journal of Adult Education (January, 1921); Lyman Beecher, A Plan for the West (1855); S. M. Crothers, Emerson: How to Know Him, chapter XI (1921); Nehemiah Cheever, "Lyceums and Societies for the Diffusion of Knowledge" (Boston, 1829); E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes, The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1910); Dorothy C. Fisher, Why Stop Learning? (1917); J. W. Hart, Adult Education (1877); T. W. Higginson, "American Audiences," in Atlantic Monthly, XVC, 88-44, (January, 1906); James L. Hill, "The New Forum and the Old Lyceum," in Biblical World, XLIX, 224-92 (April, 1917); Paul Monroe, in Cambridge History of American Literature, III, Chapter XXIII; Nation, VIII, 271-72 (April, 1889); John S. Noffsinger, Correspondence Schools, Lyceums, Chautauqua (1898); Old South Leaflets, Numbers 135 and 189 (Boston, 1830); S. C. Phillips, "On the Usefulness of Lyceums" (Boston, 1831); Report of the Commissioner of Education, I, 284 ff. (1899-1900); R. E. Riepe, America Moves West, chapter XVI (1920); R. L. Rusk, The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier, I postum (1925); Harriet K. Smith, History of the Lowell Institute (1898); W. H. Venable, Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley (1891); John H. Vincent, The Chautauqua Movement (1888).

representing one thousand town centers. The delegates zealously advocated a national system, to endure “forever and ever.” After eight years, however, this annual convention died, and with it faded the hope for centralized control. But Holbrook’s general plan had caught fire in thousands of towns scattered throughout the country and was to burn tenaciously until new fuel came through the chautauqua and university extension.

Emerson stands with Washington and Jefferson as a prophet of the future greatness of the Middle West. He loved its rugged strength, and believed that one day its pioneer coarseness would give way to an active interest in the arts. For more than twenty years he made an annual lecture tour of the Great Lakes region and the Illinois country. His essays were nearly all tried first on the lyceum platform. His contact with the West was philosophy touching nature. He never condescended and never put on airs. The following note, written in his brave, confident hand, shows him, as he looked westward, to be the same courteous and cultivated gentleman that he was in Boston or London:

Concord, Massachusetts
3 November, 1859

Dear Sir,

I am by no means sure that I can visit Terre Haute. Mr. P. L. Sherman of Chicago has kindly charged himself with the general arrangement of my visits in the West, and has probably filled the limited time of my stay. I must hear from him before I can definitely answer you.

Respectfully,

Mr. Gilbert

Mr. Gilbert

He never came, but even this little contact with the “wisest American” must have been an inspiration to the literary club that tried to engage him.

The letter of Holmes, watermarked Towgood’s Extra Super 1852, is written in long-hand by a secretary and signed by the poet. It bears distinctly the imprint of his genial personality and cultivated manners:

Boston, Nov. 7, 1859

Dear Sir,

I regret that my engagements for the coming season do not permit
Bayard Taylor’s letter is in printed form, with a postscript in his own hand. Taylor’s remarks about fees are rather naive, and reveal the true temper of the lecture business. The figures after the lecture titles indicate the voted preferences of the Ulyssean Club members:

No. 8 St. George’s Place
East 13th Street
New York

Nov. 23, 1859

Dear Sir:

My engagements for this winter will be limited, but I can accept your invitation. The evening which would best suit me is Thursday, February 2.

My subjects are
Moscow [6]
Life in the North
Alexander von Humboldt [2]
The Animal Man [1]

and you may make your own choice. Please reply as soon as possible and oblige.

Yours very truly,
Bayard Taylor

P.S. My engagements are all made, as my tour in the West will be very short. I left the above evening open for you; have heard from Evansville that you wished a lecture from me. Terms the same as at Evansville, $75. On account of my limited time, I can visit only the more remunerative places.

B. T.

Josiah G. Holland wrote a very brief note, with a characteristic touch of humor. Noticing that a part of his name was almost identical with that of Mr. Gilbert, to whom he was writing, he expressed his friendliness by underlining Josiah Gilbert:

8 "The great resource always open to him was lecturing... It was not his chosen form of expression, but having accepted the one available method of turning his experiences into gold, he spared no pains to make the best of such gifts as he had." Taylor and Seudder, Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor, I, 334.
Jos. Gilbert, Esq.

Springfield, Massachusetts
Nov. 4, 1859

Dear Sir:

I can't do it. My time is used up and I am likely to be served the same way.

Yours truly,

Josiah Gilbert Holland

George D. Prentice, the only Middle Westerner represented in the correspondence with the Ulyssean Club, comes next. It would seem from his letter that he was in considerable demand. His remark, "a thoroughly no-party discourse," is very amusing when we remember how explosively partisan anything connected with politics was in those stormy days.

Journal Office
Louisville, Ky.
Nov. 2, 1859

My dear Sir,

Yours of the 26 ult. is received. I can deliver another lecture before your society, but I think I should prefer delivering it during the present month. I expect to lecture in Lafayette about the middle of the month, and I should like to be with you the night before I am there. I shall be glad to name the exact night very soon.

If I come, I shall prefer leaving the terms to your association. I have written only political lectures, and should probably give you the "Politics, Politicians, and Political Conditions in the United States," a thoroughly no-party discourse. Please write immediately.

Truly yours,

George D. Prentice

Lecturing was "big business" in 1859. Hardly could the supply meet the demand. Whenever headliners were unobtainable, unknown second-raters had to be rushed in, and even they, if sufficiently robustious, usually succeeded. Among those both well known and robustious was B. P. Shillaber, a journalist who used the pseudonym of Mrs. Partington. Here is a specimen from his Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington (1854):

I am not so young as I once was, and I don't believe I ever shall be if I live to the age of Samson, which, heaven knows as well as I do, I don't want to, for I wouldn't be a centurion or an octogon and survive my factories and become idiomatic by any means.

An American Mrs. Malaprop, indeed! Emerson says in his Journals that the Westerners demanded a lecturer who could
make them laugh or they stalked angrily from the lecture hall. No wonder, then, that Shillaber was a success!

**Boston**

**Sept. 25, 1859**

My dear Sir,

Yours of a previous date to 16 Sept. I did not receive. In reply to your note of the mentioned date, I am compelled to give an unfavorable answer. I have abandoned all idea of going beyond western New York this winter, although many inducements have been held out by yourself and others to draw me further west. Mr. George Edward Rice and Mr. Jacob Barrow have both been added to the list of lecturers, with good appeal, as I hear, to the public favor. Thanking you for your polite invitation, I subscribe myself

Yours very truly,

B. P. Shillaber

In the bundle of letters to the Ulysseans are others written by Henry W. Bellows, O. M. Mitchell, J. H. Wainwright, G. V. Headly, and Carl Schurz. They show the difficulties that arose from poor mail service and slow transportation, and a naive readiness to mix personal affairs with business. Mitchell, for example, declares that he can not come because of his wife's illness, adding in parenthesis that she "is suffering from paralysis." But, as the letters of these lecturers tell little else, they are not quoted here.

Looking back now upon that golden age of oratory, we can easily see why lecturing was universally popular. With no radios or airplanes, with no telephones, with only very slow trains—the fastest in 1860 averaged about twenty-five miles an hour—with a deplorable scarcity of newspapers and books, with pitifully few and inefficient schools, the people naturally turned to the spoken word. For a good half-century (1825-1880) the Mississippi valley looked to this source for information and entertainment. But after the Civil War a new era was at hand. Time and opportunity had opened other educational doors. Gradually the chautauqua idea evolved, and then came the university extension courses.

One commentator, writing in 1869, says that already the lecture system was dying, except "in remoter districts of the valley of the Mississippi... where it is possible that not only the political lecturer but the others will exert a sensible intellectual influence." He is skeptical, however, adding that even Emerson, if he should go West again,
“will be assured of a large attendance only by having a committee that will add a dance and ‘an elegant collation’ to the program under the price of admission.”

Another cause of the decline of the lyceum was exploitation and commercialism. Lyman Beecher, father of Henry Ward Beecher, foresaw this danger in 1835. “What will become of the West,” he cried, “if her prosperity rushes up to such a majesty of power while those great institutions linger which are necessary to form the mind and the conscience and the heart of that vast world? . . . We must educate! We must educate! Or we must perish by our own prosperity!”

Indeed, in the end, the lecturers—that is, the educators—they themselves demanded too much prosperity, a thing unforeseen by the zealous Beecher. Emerson, a mixture of idealistic transcendentalism and shrewd Yankee practicality, gradually advanced from no fee at all for his lectures to the sum of five hundred dollars. “My pulpit,” he once said, “is the lyceum platform.” For some time his figure stood at five dollars at home, and later, in most of his trips to the West, he received fifty dollars. Henry Ward Beecher, speaking at Boston in 1880, climbed to the incredible sum of one thousand dollars. John B. Gough, the famous temperance lecturer, began at eight dollars and ended only a little below Beecher’s best. Henry M. Stanley, by virtue of having found Livingstone, made $287,070 from one hundred and ten lectures. The “star course,” as it was called, was indeed bright with the allurement of gold.

Thus ignobly perished a great educational dream. One of our presidents called the lyceum “the most American thing in America.” And it was. Like our nation, it was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Especially in the West was the lyceum a godsend. It proved to be, at the time and under the circumstances, by far the most efficient means of converting a crude and often anti-cultural people to sound ideals of living and thinking, and it pointed them the way, long and arduous though it is, that leads to sweetness and light. We, their descendants, are still laboring up the ascent. Let us look upon their letters

---

6 *Nation*, VIII. 271-72 (April, 1869).
7 *A Plea for the West*, 31-32.
8 *Biblical World*, XLIX. 226-32.
and records with gratitude. Perhaps, as Alice said, these things are only "pictures and conversations," but they are the best part of our books.