

Henry, Walter

HENRY D. THOREAU, INSTRUCTOR

Although Henry David Thoreau is one of the best known figures in American literature, it is often overlooked or forgotten that before he embarked on a career of writing he was for three years a school teacher and, what is more important, that his school is a landmark in the history of American education, anticipating by nearly a century some of the techniques in school-teaching that we think of as peculiarly modern.

Thoreau's first experience in school-teaching was a very brief one. In the fall of 1835, when he was a sophomore at Harvard, the faculty adopted a new regulation permitting students, if they needed the money, to take a thirteen-week leave of absence to teach school. One month later Thoreau took advantage of the new ruling and applied for a position teaching school in Canton, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Unfortunately virtually all records of that experience have disappeared. The Canton town historian says, without citing any authority, that Thoreau taught with "poor success." If his report is true, the fact that Thoreau had seventy pupils imposed on him at once may have been a factor. That Thoreau himself did not look upon the experience as a failure is well indicated by the fact that he later applied to a member of the Canton school committee for a recommendation as a teacher.

Thoreau's second teaching experience was even briefer. He graduated from Harvard in August of 1837 and was immediately offered a position teaching in the Center School, <sup>in his native Concord, Massachusetts,</sup> the same little brick schoolhouse on the village square that he himself had attended as a child ten and more years before, his salary to be five hundred dollars. The country was in the midst of a severe economic depression and Thoreau was one of the few members of his class lucky enough to have a position ready at hand. He accepted and started work immediately.

EDUCATION

Physically the school was much too small for the ninety scholars enrolled. It was perhaps just as well that the average attendance that winter was only fifty-two, for even then they must have crowded the tiny room. Although theoretically the Center School was aimed primarily at college preparatory work, all the better students had been siphoned off into the private Concord Academy, just as Thoreau himself had been as a student. What was left were chiefly farm boys who had little interest in learning and spent most of their time in creating discipline problems.

At the end of the second week of Thoreau's teaching, Deacon Nehemiah Ball, one of the three members of the school committee, dropped in to see how the new teacher was getting along. Observing that Thoreau was using no corporal punishment and that the classroom was not as quiet as he would have liked, he called Thoreau out into the corridor and insisted that it was his duty to flog the students on occasion or "the school would spoil"—this despite the fact that the Concord School Regulations specified that corporal punishment was to be excluded "as much as practical."

Always one to keep his side of the bargain, Thoreau returned to the room, called out several of the pupils, including the Thoreau family maid, and feruled them. The students were baffled. One later complained that in the district school he had been taught to put his books away and fold his hands when he had finished his lessons; now when he did this Thoreau whipped him for "doing nothing." Thoreau had never seemed severe before, so the unexpected whippings were the more surprising. Quite understandably it was many years before some of the astonished pupils forgave him.

That evening Thoreau handed his resignation in to the committee. If he could not teach the school in his own way, he would have none of it. He told his family that it would be impossible to keep the school as still as the committee would require on his plan; he would prefer to teach in an

academy or private school where he could have his own way. He was replaced immediately in the Center School by his friend and college classmate William Allen. The next spring, Rev. Barzillai Frost, in making his annual report for the school committee, complained about an interruption in the fall term of the Center School "which was occasioned by a change of masters and produced the usual evil attendant on that event." And thus Thoreau's brief career in public school teaching came to an end.

For nearly a year Thoreau tried unsuccessfully to find another teaching position, meanwhile earning his living working in his father's pencil factory. He wrote to Kentucky, to Virginia, to New York State. He toured a number of towns in central Maine, but all to no avail. Finally he decided to create his own position. In mid-June of 1838 he opened a private school in the family home, the Parkman House on the corner of Main Street and Sudbury Road in Concord. As might be expected, especially after his difficulties with the Concord school committee, the school was slow in getting started, but by the end of the month he had four boys from Boston enrolled and had made arrangements with his mother for them to board and room in the Thoreau home. When the master of Concord Academy resigned his position in the late summer, Thoreau immediately made arrangements with the trustees to rent their building for five dollars a quarter, and take over the name and good-will of the institution. Accordingly he announced in the Yeoman's Gazette for September 15, 1838:

CONCORD ACADEMY. The subscriber opened his school for the reception of a limited number of pupils, of both sexes, on Monday, September the tenth. Instruction will be given in the usual English branches, and the studies preparatory to a collegiate course. Terms--Six dollars per quarter. Henry

D. Thoreau, Instructor.

Samuel Hoar, Nathan Brooks, and John Keyes, the trustees of Concord Academy, and Ralph Waldo Emerson offered their names as referees.

Few new pupils answered Thoreau's advertisements. By the sixth of October he was so discouraged with his prospects that he applied for a position in the Taunton, Massachusetts, high school, explaining that his private school was not proving sufficiently lucrative to continue. But no offer came from Taunton, and so, having nothing better at hand, he continued with the academy. By the end of the term, however, the situation had changed. Not only had enough pupils enrolled to justify continuing the school, there were enough to warrant hiring another teacher. And so it was that his brother John gave up his school in Roxbury and came to join Henry at the Concord Academy. On February 9, 1839, John announced in the Yeoman's Gazette:

CONCORD ACADEMY. The Above School will be continued under the care of the subscriber, after the commencement of the spring term, Monday, March 11th. Terms per Quarter: English Branches, \$4.00. Languages included, \$6.00. He will be assisted in the classical department by Henry D. Thoreau, the present instructor. N.B. Writing will be particularly attended to. John Thoreau, Jr., Preceptor.

Before long the enrollment evidently reached the maximum of twenty-five which they had agreed was as much as they wished to handle. Tradition has it that eventually there was even a waiting list to get in and they were able to refuse any short-term pupils, insisting on a minimum enrollment of twelve weeks. Most of their pupils, quite naturally, came from Concord. Among them were Jerome Bacon, Edward Wood, Joseph Keyes, Sarah, Helen, and Martha Hosmer, Elijah Wood, James and Story Gerrish, George and Joseph Brooks, Benjamin W. Lee, Cyrus Warren, Henry Bigelow, Kilham Flint, George

Loring, Charles Kilham, Joseph Dakin, Sidney Rice, Gorham and Martha Bartlett, Sherman and Almira Tuttle, Benjamin Tolman, James Barrett Wood, Samuel Burr and George F. Hoar. Later when the Alcotts moved to Concord, Louisa May and her sister enrolled. Thomas Hosmer and two of his friends walked the five miles each way daily from Bedford. Horace Hosmer came in from Acton, and Edmond Sewall was a boarding pupil from Scituate. Two students, Alexander and Andrew Beath, were from Cuba.

The Thoreau brothers, as might be expected, had their own ideas of how to run a school and how to maintain discipline. When a pupil entered the school, he was immediately taken aside and asked why he wished to enroll. When he replied that he wished to study Latin, Greek, algebra, geometry, and so on, they would reply, "If you really wish to study those things, we can teach you, if you will obey our rules and promise to give your mind to your studies; but if you come to idle and play, or to see other boys study, we shall not want you for a pupil. Do you promise, then, to do what we require? If so, we will do our best to teach you what we know ourselves." Once the boy promised, he was promptly reminded, if he were idle or mischievous, that he had broken his word. Another device they used was to assign each child his individual duties in the daily routine to keep him busy in his moments of leisure. By such methods they were able to avoid the use of corporal punishment and yet maintain what all their pupils remembered as an almost military discipline.

The school was started each morning at eight-thirty with prayers, followed by a little address to put the scholars' minds in proper trim for the work of the day. Once Henry spoke of the rotation of the seasons and how it worked to the advantage of man, impressing on the children the beauties of the summer, autumn, winter and spring in turn. So engaging

was his story, it is said, that one could have heard a pin drop. He had a real faculty, Thomas Hosmer thought, for interesting his charges and winning their respect.

On another occasion he spoke of the certainty of the existence of a wise and friendly power overlooking all. He asked that if the children should go into a shop and see all the nicely finished wheels, pinions, springs and frame pieces of a watch laying spread out on a bench and again came to find them exactly put together and working in unison to move the hands on a dial and show the passage of time, whether they could believe this had come about by chance or rather that they should know that somebody with thought and plan and power had been there.

When Thoreau once overheard some of the boys swearing, he called them all together and lectured them:

Boys, if you went to talk business with a man, and he persisted in thrusting words having no connection with the subject into all parts of every sentence--Boot-jack, for instance,--wouldn't you think he was taking a liberty with you, and trifling with your time, and wasting his own?

He then went on to introduce "boot-jack" frequently and violently into a sentence to demonstrate the absurdity of profanity in a striking way.

## II.

So far as the classes went, in general, John, using the downstairs room, taught the "English branches" and elementary mathematics; Henry, using the upstairs hall, taught Latin, Greek, French, physics, natural philosophy, and natural history.

A typical day in the Thoreau school has been recorded by Edmund Sewall in the letter to his father of April 23, 1870:

In the morning I recite Solid Geometry. I draw the figures and write down the demonstration on the slate after Mr. Henry has taken the book and when I have done carry it to him. He examines it to see that it is right. Geography comes next, immediately after recess. Smith's geography is the one used. I borrow it of one of the boys who has done studying it. Grammar comes next. Parker and Fox's is used. It is in two parts. I have been through the first part and have begun the second. I borrow it of Mr. Thoreau. . . .

In the afternoon I am exclusively under Mr. Henry's jurisdiction. I recite in Algebra and Latin generally before recess. In the afternoon Mr. Henry's classes go up into the hall over the schoolroom to recite. In Latin I am in company with Miss Hine. We are now on the life of Alcibiades in Nepos and in the exception in conjugation in the grammar.

Geography is studied by a good many. We draw maps of the states. Saturday morning is devoted to writing composition. The two that I have written have been on birds and berries.

The school hours are from half past eight to half past twelve in the morning and from two to four in the afternoon. Mr. Thoreau reads [a]loud those compositions which he thinks will please the scholars, which sometimes occasions a great deal of laughter. The boys sometimes write their lives of those of some venerable Aunt Hannah or Uncle Ichabod.

The school was noted for its innovations. It was one of the first in our educational history to operate on the principle of "learning by doing" and to devote a considerable part of its program to field trips. At least once a week, and usually much more frequently, the whole school was taken for a

walk in the woods or fields or a row on one of the rivers or ponds. As one might expect, most such excursions were devoted to the study of natural history. Once Thoreau astonished the boys by plucking a plant so minute they could barely see it and demonstrating with a magnifying glass that it was just then in blossom with a perfect but miniscule flower. He told the boys that he was so well acquainted with the flowers of Concord, Acton, and Lincoln that he could tell by the blooming of the flowers in what month he was. On another occasion he shot a slate-colored junco for them so they could examine it more closely. And when no other game presented itself, shot at a snowball set up on a post, just for fun.

The children were impressed that he seemed to know the birds, the beasts, and the flowers not as a surgeon who dissected them, but as "one boy knows another with all their delightful little habits and fashions." The pupils used to declare to each other, "If anything happened in the deep woods which only came about once in a hundred years, Henry Thoreau would be sure to be on the spot at the time and know the whole story." They could see no evidence that he wished to display his own superior knowledge, but only to impress them with the wonders of Nature and to impart to them his own skill in such matters.

He also, on their excursions together, took the opportunity to acquaint the children with the history of the area, particularly that of the Indians. He showed them where to find the arrowheads, spear heads, pestles, and other stone implements so common then on the Concord fields and meadows--if one knew where and how to look for them. Henry Warren has recalled a time when they were sailing down the Concord River past the Great Meadows and Ball's Hill when Thoreau called their attention to a spot on the river shore which he thought to be the site of an Indian fishing village. A week later he brought them back there, this time armed with a spade. "Do you see," he asked them, "anything here that would be likely to attract Indians to this



spot?" One lad pointed out that the river was available for fishing; another, that the woods were nearby for hunting. With Thoreau's help another discovered a spring nearby that made good water readily available, and still another that the nearby hill sheltered the spot from the northern winds of the winter. Then, after careful investigation, Thoreau struck his spade into the soil several times without result. The boys had just begun to think their teacher mistaken when his spade struck a stone. Moving forward a foot or two, he struck another stone, and then another. He soon uncovered a whole circle of red, fire-marked rocks that indicated an ancient Indian fireplace. But having proven his point, he then carefully buried them as he found them, leaving them for someone else to discover at a later date.

Field trips of still other types were taken on occasion, too. A group were taken to the office of the local Yeoman's Gazette to watch the compositors setting type. Once they were taken to Pratt's gunsmith shop to observe the regulating of gunsights. Each spring Thoreau had the land plowed and providing each of the boys with a little hoe, set them to work planting their own individual plots. When his boat needed tarring, the children were taken along to watch the process and play in the shallow water while John and Henry worked.

In the fall of 1840 Thoreau purchased a combination levelling instrument and circumferenter and introduced surveying into the curriculum to give their mathematics a more practical and vivid application. He took his class out to Fairhaven Bay and had them work out a practice survey to the cliff. Unwittingly he thus stumbled upon an interest that within a few years was to provide a regular source of income for him.

Although inside the classroom both Thoreau brothers could be formal, outside there was much more freedom. They extended the traditional ten-

minute recess to half an hour while the school windows were open to ventilate the room and give the children fresh air when they returned from their playing—an almost unheard of innovation. Both teachers would oftentimes go out into the schoolyard at recess and join with the children in their amusements. John was always ready to joke or play with the students, but Henry seemed to be a little more stand-offish and on his dignity so long as they were in the vicinity of the school. However, as soon as they got outside the schoolgrounds, he let down the bars and became one of the boys.

On one occasion Thoreau overheard some of the children arguing over the relative merits of their skates. Some of the Concord boys were belittling the old-fashionedness of the skates that Thomas Hosmer and his companions from Bedford had used in skating along the river to school. They in turn argued that their skates, despite the lack of style, would stand up under a test of performance. Thoreau stepped in and suggested that they go down to the river and put the two types of skates to a test. But when young Hosmer argued that the race should begin the moment they knelt on the ice to buckle on the skates, stating that in the quality of the skates should be included the speed with which they could be put on, Thoreau over-ruled him and insisted that the test should be taken on the original terms as to which were the speedier on the ice.

George Hoar remembered that once when a group of the pupils went on an expedition to Walden woods, old Tommy Wyman who lived there by himself, not liking the idea of the boys' invading the huckleberry fields, tried to frighten them off by telling them that there was an Indian doctor living nearby who caught small boys and cut out their livers to make medicine. Frightened, the boys dashed toward the safety of home, only to meet Thoreau

out for his afternoon walk. Hearing their story, he laughed and then reassured them, as he pulled a key out of his pocket, that if he met that Indian he would ram the key down his throat.

Edmund Sewall, in his diary for April 1, 1840, recorded some further adventures of the pupils:

I had a nice sail on the river yesterday after school. Messrs. John and Henry T. rowed and Jesse and I were passengers. We went up the river against the wind and then sailed down to the monument where we got out with the intention of all embarking again, but Mr. J and Jesse being near the monument and Mr. H and I near the boat we jumped in and went across to the abutment of the former bridge on the opposite side. I suppose that we should have come back for them if they had staid but they went off with the sail which we had left on the bank. Mr. H. rowed up the river a little way and got out. We had not the keys of the boat and should have been obliged to leave her without being securely fastened or have hauled her upon the shore if Joseph had not come down with the keys. He got two wet feet for his pains.

A week later he recorded still another:

In the afternoon we went off into the woods with a parcel of the boys of the school where we played awhile and drank out [of] a jug of lemon-ade we had carried with us. We then left the jug till we came back and started for Walden pond. As we were coming back we saw Aunt [Prudence Ward] and Mr. Thoreau, and I went and joined her while the rest of the boys kept on. We went to Goose pond where we heard a tremendous chirping of frogs. It has been disputed whether the noise was caused by frogs so we were very curious to know what it was. Mr. Thoreau however caught three very small frogs, two of them in the act of chirping. While bringing them home one of them chirped in his hat.

He carried them to Mr. Emerson in a tumbler of water. They chirped there also. On Sunday morning I believe he put them into a barrel with some rain water in it. He threw in some sticks for them to rest on. They sometimes crawled up the side of the barrel. I saw one of them chirping. He had swelled out the loose skin of his throat like a little bladder.

Sunday (April 12) . . . . At night we heard the frogs peeping and on Monday morning they were nowhere to be seen. They had probably crawled out of some hole in the cover of the barrel and made for the river as Mrs. Thoreau affirmed that when she heard them in the night their voices seemed to recede in that direction. Mr. Thoreau intended to have preserved them in spirits.

The children had their own adventures too. Once Georgie Hoar cut the bell rope and another of the boys <sup>b</sup>climbed up into the belfry and tolled the bell the entire time Henry was walking from his home around the corner to the school--Henry's reaction is not recorded. Another time Nathan Brooks' son broke a window in the school, and despite the fact that Brooks was a trustee of the academy, Thoreau sent him a bill for fifty cents--which was paid. On still another occasion Edmund Sewall and some of his fellow boarding pupils started a snowball fight with the "townies" and in their excitement tipped over a bowl of pudding cooling in Mrs. Thoreau's back entry. They were sentenced to salt fish for supper.

The boarding pupils, in general, found life in the Thoreau home pleasant. Horace Hosmer has recalled:

I never forgot those dinners; the room was shaded and cool, there was no hustle. Mrs. Thoreau's bread, brown and white, was the best I had ever tasted. They had, besides, vegetables and fruit, pies, or puddings; but I never saw meat there. Their living was a revelation to me. I

think they were twenty years ahead of the times in Concord.

At the house there was nothing jarring. Mrs. Thoreau was pleasant and talkative and her husband was always kind. If I ever saw a gentleman at home, it was he.

In later years the pupils remembered the school and its teachers with "affection," "gratitude," and "enthusiasm." Benjamin Lee thought he would never forget the kindness and good-will of the Thoreau brothers "in their great desire to impress upon the minds of their scholars to do right always." Horace Hosmer recalled they were "rigid in exacting good work" and remembered Henry's keeping one pupil after school for nearly an hour because he omitted an et in reading a Latin sentence-- but, Hosmer added, it was because Thoreau was a "conscientious teacher" and "wouldn't take a man's money for nothing."

In general the children seemed to favor John over Henry. They thought John the "more human" and "loving." He understood and thought of others, while Henry thought more about himself, they felt. Henry was "rigid" but "not disagreeable." One pupil described him as then having been "in the green apple stage." Another said they "loved" John, but "respected" Henry. On the other hand, George Keyes remembered Henry as "thoroughly alive and a very pleasant talker," and Thomas Hosmer recalled the children catching him by the hand as he went away to walk with him and hear more." George Hoar remembered his taking part in their games, taking them for long walks in the woods and showing them the best places to find huckleberries, blackberries, chestnuts, lilies, and cardinal flowers. He said they used to call him "Trainer Thoreau" because the boys called soldiers "trainers" and he had a long, measured stride and an erect carriage that, despite his short and rather ungainly

figure, reminded them of a soldier.

The Thoreau school lasted not quite three years. Although it had been prospering, it was brought to an abrupt close on April 1, 1841. John's health, always poor, suddenly became markedly worse. There were times when what he called "colic" confined him to the house all day. But tuberculosis was the real trouble. Frail and thin--he weighed only 117 pounds--he could stand the strain of teaching no longer. Since Henry did not care to carry on by himself, the doors of the school were closed and John left immediately on a tour of New Hampshire, hoping vainly that the mountain air would benefit his weakened lungs. A month later the Concord Academy trustees persuaded a James Oliver to reopen the school, but he was not able to make a go of it and the school closed down completely. Thus one of the pioneer experiments in modern education and Henry Thoreau's own school-teaching days came to an abrupt end.

The Thoreau school was a century ahead of its time. Granted Bronson Alcott's famous Temple School had anticipated some of its innovations by a few years. But Alcott with his experimentation had brought the wrath of the community down on his head. The Thoreaus, on the other hand, although many of their innovations were more radical than those of Alcott, won acceptance and made their school a considerable and memorable success.