

Early School Discipline

by Michael Day



Young visitors to a restored one room schoolhouse are always interested in the punishments that were used. Everyone has heard of the "hickory stick" and many wonder if it is true that children were routinely beaten with sticks. Were teachers that harsh? Didn't parents complain? Corporal punishments were quite common in nineteenth century schools and the punishments took many forms. The most common means of punishing students was with the ferule, a long thin piece of wood used for beating students. Because it had a straight edge, it was also useful for drawing straight lines on paper. This is the origin of the school ruler. But there were many other ways of punishing unruly students, and there were also many teachers who relied solely on their own moral authority to control their classes. Many nineteenth century writers have included in their works remembrances of their school experiences, and from these we can gain a picture of the range of approaches to school discipline.

Warren Burton, author of *The District School As It Was*, tells us of one

particularly harsh teacher and the punishments he employed. "Almost every method was tried that was ever suggested to the brain of pedagogue. Some were feruled on the hand; some were whipped with a rod on the back; some were compelled to hold out, at arm's length, the largest book which could be found, or a great leaden inkstand, till muscle and nerve, bone and marrow, were tortured with the continued exertion. If the arm bent or inclined from the horizontal level, it was forced back again by a knock of the ferula on the elbow.

"He had recourse to another method, almost as barbarous. It was standing in a stooping posture, with a finger on the head of a nail in the floor. It was a position not particularly favorable to health of body or soundness of mind; the head being brought about as low as the knees, the blood rushing to it, and pressing unnaturally on the veins, often caused a dull pain, and a staggering dizziness.



"These punishments were sometimes rendered doubly painful by their taking place directly in front of the enormous fire, so that the pitiable culprit was

roasted as well as racked. Another mode of punishment — an anti-whispering process — was setting the jaws at a painful distance apart, by inserting a chip perpendicularly between the teeth. Then we occasionally had our hair pulled, our noses tweaked, our ears pinched and boxed, or snapped. There were minor penalties, moreover, for minor faults. The uneasy urchins were clapped into the closet, thrust under the desk, or perched on its top. Boys were made to sit in the girls' seats, amusing the school with their grinning awkwardness; and girls were obliged to sit on the masculine side of the aisle, with crimsoned necks, and faces buried in their aprons.



"I would not have it understood that this master was singular in his punishments; for such methods of correcting offenders have been in use time out of mind. He was distinguished only for resorting to them more frequently than any other instructor within my own observation. The truth is that it seemed to be the prevailing opinion both among teachers and parents, that boys and girls would play and be mischievous, and that consequently masters must punish in some way or other. It was a matter of course; nothing better was expected."

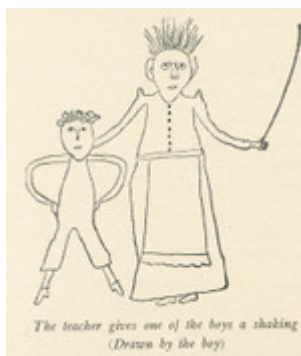
The thinking that Burton reported - "that masters must punish in some way or other" - undoubtedly led many teachers to inflict on their students the same punishments that had been inflicted upon them. But some people questioned the old ways and sought better ways to control their classes. Eliphalet Nott, whose teaching career would ultimately take him to a college presidency, had like many other children, suffered under harsh masters, but he determined not to follow in their footsteps. Of his childhood experiences he remembered that, "if I was not whipped more than three times a week, I considered myself for the time peculiarly fortunate.



This discipline of the rod became peculiarly irksome to me, and I thought, unjustified; and I formed a resolution, if I lived to be a man, I would not be like other men in regard to their treatment of children. Through the mercy of God I did live to be a man, and when at the age of eighteen I became installed as master of a district school in the eastern part of Franklin Connecticut, I made up my mind to substitute in my school moral motives in the place of the rod; and I frankly told my assembled pupils so. The school responded to my appeal, and thereafter, though we played and gamboled together as equals in play-hours, the moment we entered the school-house, a subordination and application to study was observable, that became a matter of remark and

admiration among the inhabitants of the district."

George Hoar, a prominent Massachusetts political leader, who attended school in the 1830's remembered that, "In the infant schools, which were kept by women, of course, the discipline was not expected to be so severe. The schoolmistress in those days wore a busk - a flat piece of lancewood, hornbeam, or some other like tough and elastic wood, thrust into a sort of pocket or sheath in her dress, which came up almost to the chin and came down below the waist. This was intended to preserve the straightness and grace of her figure. When the small boy misbehaved, the schoolma'am would unsheathe this weapon, and for some time thereafter, the culprit found sitting down exceedingly uncomfortable. Sometimes the sole of the schoolmistress's slipper answered the same purpose, and sometimes a stick from some neighboring birch-tree. It all came to pretty much the same thing in the end. The schoolmistress knew well how to accomplish her purpose. There was a diversity of gifts but



the same spirit." Writing some fifty years later, Wilbur Cross, (later a Governor of Connecticut) also found that women were less severe than men: "Women teachers confined their discipline to the ferule which, as it hit the palm of the

hand, hurt worse than head bumping, but all in all, corporal punishment was more or less a farce. As it was expected, it did not disturb us much. And it was sheer amusement when the other boy got the licking." Cross also remembered the unique way one of his early teachers had of dealing with whisperers. "One master carried a pair of horse's bits in his pocket, which he used to toss on our desk when we got too noisy, where they struck with a rattle that silenced all other sounds. After a recitation was over he would put the bits into the mouth of one of us. Not a bad way to stop whispering throughout the entire school for that day."



Lucy Lane Allen was well respected during her short teaching career and prided herself on never using corporal punishments: "Before I was seventeen years old I was requested to teach the summer school in the center of the town of Medford, Mass. This I accepted, and was examined by Thomas Prentiss, D.D., in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and sewing. Geography and arithmetic were not taught at that time in the summer schools. Between fifty and sixth pupils attended, some nearly as old as myself. Many of the boys and girls brought work - straw-braiding, sewing and knitting. I taught in that

town four summers - until I married - never taking a stick into school or inflicting corporal punishment, as many of my pupils now living can attest. I was invited home with the children very often, and my success in discipline, I think, was owing in a great measure to my intimate acquaintance with the parents, and also to the fact that all of the pupils were busy at some work when not at their books."

An amusing approach to school-house management was reported by Salem Town. He remembered one teacher as, "an Englishman, and said to be well-educated, but half crazy. Folks said he was love-cracked, and I wondered what that meant. His mode of government was unique. When the scholars became noisy, he would stamp his foot upon the floor with tremendous power, and commence pounding his own head with his fist, exclaiming, 'Children, if you do not behave better, I will go right off and leave you.' This for the time being would frighten the children into silence".

James Garfield, who would later become the twentieth President of the United States, taught school in his early years as a way of earning money for college. In 1856, he apparently had some unruly students, and seemed to anticipate that words alone would not control them. In his diary he noted that "some of the boys" were "greatly disposed to quarrel with each other and I fear that the rod alone will subdue that pugnacious spirit. When nothing else will, I believe that the effect of it is very salutary. I hate to use it at all". A few days later he again wrote that "They are inclined to fight and quarrel." To deal with this, he, "Brought three whips into the schoolhouse, the first that I have

had," and a few days later, (May 6) he had occasion to use them: "Today I was, for the first time in this school, under the very disagreeable necessity of flogging two boys 12 or 14 years old. I had repeatedly warned them against fighting, and told them that if they fought I should castigate them. Today, William Perdew and Edwin Boyce came to an open rupture and I flogged them thoroughly. I hope I shall have to do so no more. I am not totally averse to corporal punishment, yet I think there is ten times as much done as is necessary. As love is the stronger passion than fear it is better to govern by love as far as we can - but there are exceptions." Several days later he noted in his diary that, "I find that the flogging has had a good effect on the school."

In time the more violent approaches were discontinued by masters or banned by school boards, but it was not until late in the twentieth century that physical punishment was effectively eliminated from the public schools.



Michael Day was a regular contributor to the CSAA e-newsletter and publisher of **Books for A One-Room Schoolhouse**. Currently, his website is inoperable. We appreciate every submission from Mike, so we will write to ask of his whereabouts. If anyone knows, please email CSAA!