The Wickersham Pedagogical Collection: Legacy of A Founding Educator

by Meaghan Shirk

"[Wickersham’s] legacy at Millersville was a tradition of teacher training, coeducational instruction, strict discipline, high academic standards, and frugal financial management." -- We Sing to Thee, Dr. Dennis Downey (pg 37)

J.P. Wickersham was involved with Millersville University from its inception as the Lancaster County Institute on April 7, 1855 through its designation in 1859 as the first State Normal School, with the title of the State Normal School for the Second Normal District of Pennsylvania. A strong believer in teacher education, Wickersham had founded the initial summer institute as a precursor to a formal year-round teacher training school. "James P. Wickersham served the Normal Institute most vigorously without compensation and regarded the work as part of his position as county superintendent." (pg 25, Graver) The Institute opened its doors to 133 students in the summer of 1855 to 1866, and was such a resounding success that Wickersham and his fellow professors were able to push for the immediate opening of the Lancaster County Normal School in the fall of 1855. Wickersham was principal of the school for all but one year from the school's creation in 1855, and "though he served at the pleasure of the trustees, Wickersham was never bashful in informing the trustees of just what should be their pleasure." (pg 29, Downey) Wickersham left his post as principal of the state school, then fondly known as the Millersville State Normal School, to accept a position as State Superintendent in 1866. His impact on the founding of the University was felt long after his active involvement with the school had ceased.

Following Wickersham's death in 1891, his children donated his extensive collection of pedagogical books, numbering over 2,000 volumes, to the Millersville State Normal School. The Normal Journal marked the occasion with an article in which it stated that "this donation will be most highly prized both for its intrinsic value and for the reason that it will..."
A Singing Needles Memory

by Kitty Glass

When I heard the old building known as “Singing Needles” was to be torn down fairly soon, I had a feeling of sadness. As I was growing up, I spent a short time operating a sewing machine in this historic Millersville landmark. My research into the building uncovered an interesting history. There may be other old time residents of Millersville who have more to add about the Singing Needles building. I am hoping that this article will bring forth recollections from others.

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By the time I became associated with Singing Needles, the construction of women’s cotton dresses and aprons was the main product. During the summer of 1947, I sat in front of a sewing machine stitching the seams on pockets that were to go on aprons and dresses. The pockets came in stacks of hundreds so; needless to say, I became quite proficient by the end of the summer. Because I was a summer employee, I was not given the higher level sewing jobs. The sewing machines lined the whole length of the building and the noise of the machines became familiar. The hours were long—from 7am to 4pm, as I recall, and not much time for breaks. The building was not air conditioned and the machines added to the heat of the summer. Most of the employees were women but the manager was a man. Being young and restless, I remember I was not too happy at being confined every day in the warm sunny weather. I can’t remember if I was paid for the number of pockets I sewed in a day or whether I received an hourly wage. I do remember that the pay was good for a teenager’s summer job.

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A small “commonwealth book” of transcribed pieces was written by Elizabeth Shippen and her friends and relatives over the period 1831-1842. Two of the items are dated in 1831. Lancaster county family names represented include Housekeeper, Swift, Grubb, Snyder, and Parry.

The T. Everett Harre Collection is a recent donation from Kinsey Baker of the Book Haven in Lancaster. T. Everett Harre was a novelist originally from Marietta, NY, who lived for most of his life in New York and came to prominence through his first work, Behold The Woman!, which chronicled the dangers of white slavery (prostitution). This collection contains Harre’s correspondence, photographs, typescripts of novels, contracts with publishing companies, and copies of his books. Harre maintained friendships and correspondence with actors, writers, and activists across the political spectrum during the first half of the 20th century. Harre died in 1948.
According to the Philosophy of Phrenology (1854), which examines the theories and philosophy behind Phrenology.

School Amusements; or, How to make the School Interesting: Embracing Simple Rules for Military and Gymnastic Exercises, and Hints Upon the General Management of the School Room, by N.W. Taylor Root (1857), instructs teachers and faculty as to the proper use of exercise in relation to a classroom setting, and includes numerous exercises of a military or athletic nature for male students. Moral, Intellectual, and Physical Culture; or, the Philosophy of True Living, by Prof. F.G. Welch (1869), includes instructions on how a professor at the collegiate level can use exercises to improve both mind and body in the classroom, for both sexes, in order to prevent students from being forced to drop their courses due to health reasons.

Morals for the Young; or, Good Principles Instilling Wisdom, by Emma Willard (1871), was written with the purpose of instructing teachers on how to inspire morality in their young charges while in the classroom. Also on the topic of morality in the classroom is A Manual of Morals for Common Schools. Adapted also to the use of Families, by A. Hall (1850), though this book is intended more for use by the students than by the instructor.

In The New American First Reader, by Epes Sargen and Amasa May (1871), the student is given basic lessons that begin with the alphabet, punctuation, and short words such as “cat” and “dog,” and builds up to short passages of only a few sentences. Wickersham owned many such readers for varying age levels and abilities.

The Wickersham Pedagogical Collection is a unique and valuable resource documenting both the content and process of education during the 19th century. Millersville’s reputation as an institution for teacher preparation is based on the strong foundation built by its founders, including J.P. Wickersham. This collection of books continues to instruct current and future teachers, and others interested in the development of the myriad disciplines reflected in the educational history of the United States. Sources


The Normal Journal. February 1892.

Muehlg Stoddard is a current student in History. In addition to serving as a Graduate Assistant for the History Department, Muehlg works as a Student Supervisor in Archives & Special Collections.

The March 15, 2005, opening of the Millersville University 150th Anniversary Women’s Oral History Project Exhibit—Always Part of Me: Women Remember Millersville was the culmination of over 2 years of work on the part of the faculty coordinating team (Dr. Marilyn Parrish, Ganser Library; Dr. Carla Rineer, English; Dr. Barb Stengel, Education; Dr. Tracey Weis, History; Dr. Darla Williams, Communications & Theatre and Director of Women’s Studies) and over 100 students. More than 50 oral history interviews were collected, focusing on women who were at Millersville during the years 1928-1962. Students were involved in all aspects of the project, including interviews, transcriptions, research, theme development, graphic design, and web design. The web exhibit was designed by Ryan Meier and will be a permanent exhibit on the Special Collections website: http://sc.library.millersville.edu/oral-hist/index.html. The web exhibit was partially funded through a Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission Local History Grant.

To celebrate Millersville’s 150th Anniversary, Archives students have developed a Millersville University Timeline as a new exhibit on the Special Collections website. Ryan Meier developed the initial framework, and Mark Gormley created the exhibit using Flash. Kevin Heller assisted with text. The timeline will be a permanent addition to the Special Collections website: http://sc.library.millersville.edu/timeline/index.cfm.

Each year, Archives students and staff assist the Alumni Association in scanning photographs for the Alumni Week Exhibit, coordinated by Dr. Dominic D’Nunzio. These photographs feature the activities of specific classes—this year 1930, 1955, and 1980. Alumni Weekend coincides with the Closing Celebration of the 150th Anniversary on April 16. The final exhibit of the 150th Anniversary year opened on April 22 at the Lancaster County Historical Society. Common Threads: 150 years of Millersville-Lancaster Connections. This exhibit was developed by Archives student assistant Laura Kuchmay (a History major) together with Barry Rauhauser, Exhibits Curator at the Lancaster County Historical Society. The exhibit traces the rich connections and contributions of Millersville to Lancaster and the broader community over the past 150 years. The exhibit opening reception followed a presentation by Dr. Dennis Downey, titled: “Intimate Acquaintances: Narrating the Millersville-Lancaster Story.”

The 150th Anniversary has been a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the history of Millersville University and Archives & Special Collections has been involved in many of the year’s celebrations. We welcome the members of the University community and the region to visit us on the 4th floor of Ganser Library (and our website: http://sc.library.millersville.edu) to use the many resources which document the important history of Millersville University.

Becoming a Friend

People become Friends of Ganser Library when they make a donation to Millersville University and request mailings from the Friends. Encourage your friends to become Friends of the Library through their support of Millersville University. For more information, contact the Millersville University Development Office at (717) 872-3820.