Optional Resource Material

SECTION II

The Autobiography of Woodbridge N. Ferris

Country School Days

On a spring morning when I was four years of age, father walked with me to the rural school house, a distance of about one-half mile.

During the eight succeeding years school was the horror of my life. For three years my entire outfit consisted of a reader. I was not allowed to have a slate for fear I might indulge in making pictures. Life in the school-room was a burden. My unsatisfied craving for something to do forced me into mischief and mischief brought me into conflict with the teacher with the oldtime result, frequent floggings.

Our school building was equipped with crude seats and desks, one blackboard ten or twelve feet long and three feet wide, a Webster's chart, a tall red desk for the teacher, a water pail, a broom, and a large box stove. From forty to forty-five pupils could be accommodated. The school premises were absolutely destitute of all conveniences for health and decency. The boys and girls had an alternate recess morning and afternoon. These conditions continued for five or six years after my first day at school.

My teacher was a woman. At that time it was the custom to employ a woman for a term of three months in the spring and a man for four months beginning early in November.

I recall vividly my little red dress. I infer that fashion in 1847 [*sic* 1857] sanctioned this form of attire for a small boy. I also remember my green covered primer with a narrow red strip of cloth at the back for holding the part together. I alone constituted the primer class. Four times a day I recited. Day after day the teacher pointing to each letter of the alphabet asked, "What is that?"

For weeks and months I replied truthfully, "I do not know." This was the "A B C" method with a vengeance. I wore out two primers. I am sure that three months passed without my having learned the entire alphabet. Possibly I may have learned those fascinating expressings, b-a, ba; b-e, be; b-i, bi; b-o, bo; and b-u, bu, I do not know when I learned to read.

During the hours I was not reciting, I sat on a high seat swinging my feet, when I was not busy carving the desk, or making pin hooks or making spit balls. I was not permitted to have a slate and pencil. Scratch tablets were not then in use. The agony of those hours is never to be forgotten. The recesses, the "noonings," the anticipated day's end, the Sundays and Saturdays constituted my only joy. Sometimes I dreamed of the vacations. On account of conditions already mentioned very few if any of the pupils escaped the contaminating influence that prevailed on the play ground. During my first four or five years in this school, especially winters, there were two groups of pupils; the older from twelve to twenty years of age, the young from five to eleven. The older boys dominated over the younger in a very unsavory and arbitrary way. My early school environment was vile. No reader of this sketch would excuse me for describing it. My love and respect for my father, mother and sisters saved me from serious permanent injury.

Up to the time I was twelve years of age no pupil in this school showed any sign of a marked degree of intelligence. More than a half century has passed since the time herein mentioned, and so far as I can learn no

one from this neighborhood has held any higher office than path-master. Within the last thirty years two young men, some of my classmates, have become eminent physicians, and two or three have become successful business men. I attribute the mental and moral barrenness of this neighborhood to degrading social conditions and inefficient teachers.

At ten years of age I could read aloud fairly well. In fact I learned to read in spite of the school. Father could neither read nor write. When the Civil War broke out I was eight years of age. The only publication that came into the home was a New York weekly newspaper. Mother could have read to father had not the cares of a rapidly increasing family interfered. Father therefore insisted upon my reading aloud the war news in its entirety. Mother often listened while doing a score or more things about the house. Father was slightly deaf, but when I raised my voice he said most emphatically, "I am not deaf. Read distinctly and I will hear every word." As a result of his command I acquired a clear enunciation, a distinct articulation. Possibly this experience has led me to emphasize the importance of reading aloud.

While attending the rural school I engaged in the simple out-of-door sports, such as quoits, goal, baseball, wrestling, snap the whip and in winter, fox and geese. I was never a leader in games, although in baseball I was a fair catcher. During the summer I frequented, with other boys, the big creek where I learned to swim. In winter I had my share of enjoyment in riding or sliding down hill. I also learned to skate.

About this time I had one playmate, Rossman Snyder, who received all of the attention my leisure hours and half-days would permit. I still have a tintype picture representing us in a standing position just prior to his leaving for his new home at Oxford, Michigan. I could mention other playmates of rural school days but their influence was essentially negative.

At the age of twelve I had the use of my father's smooth bore rifle with which I traveled thousands of miles over the hills and through the valleys hunting partridges, quails, squirrels and rabbits. From spring until autumn I trapped woodchucks.

As a boy, I was surprised to hear my father, a lone Democrat in his benighted neighborhood, discuss with force and accuracy the great questions of the hour. He would not have been benefited by the modern advertised memory system. There were a host of things he wanted to know, and having heard them read once he must use them or lose them, I rejoice in the fact that if I am to keep a gem of knowledge I must use it.

The winter I was twelve years of age marks the turning point in my school life. William Holdridge, a teacher who lived in the district, invited the arithmetic class, of which I was a member, to visit his home evenings. His personal encouragement aroused in me a hunger for knowledge, a desire to do something and be something.

I am not astonished over the fact that I was fourteen years of age before I formed the reading habit. Before leaving the country school I read in Sanders' fifth reader; that is I pronounced the words. I never so much as dreamed that those excellent readers contained stories and poems which would fire the imagination and awaken the intellect of even a mediocre boy. The teachers in this school were enthusiastic only on pauses; for a period we paused long enough to count six; for a colon, four; for a semi-colon, two; for a comma, one.

In this school I began the study of arithmetic when I was nine or ten. On account of my father's inability to use a pencil or chalk to aid his memory in calculation, I was obliged to recognize his needs and put on record the results of his mental computations. Of course there are no computations outside of a calculating machine that are not mental. From him I learned a little mental arithmetic, but at school I accomplished nothing in written arithmetic until I was twelve or thirteen.

I began, at about the same time, the study of geography or rather the memorizing of geographical terms. I learned to bound states and territories, to describe the location of mountains and rivers, tried to commit to memory names of
seaports and inland cities. Most of the descriptive matter, the only part of McNally's geography that could interest a live boy, was omitted.

A little later I persuaded my father to purchase for me an English grammar. He entertained grave doubts about its value; so did I, later on.

Penmanship and spelling were in the regular routine of my school work. Copy books were then in vogue. An itinerant writing teacher conducted evening classes in our neighborhood. I have often expressed surprise at the remarkable results secured by this teacher in twelve evenings of two hours each. I actually learned to write a rapid, legible hand by taking this brief course; so did the majority of the other pupils. There is no longer any mystery involved. The traveling teacher could write; he knew how to teach writing; his financial success depended upon results.

In teaching spelling the men teachers were fairly successful. I never learned how to spell. My diaries, begun when I was fourteen years of age, showed more ingenuity in wrong spelling than Josh Billings ever displayed. Considering the fact that I am not a humorist and that I have attempted scientific phonetic spelling, my case deserves the attention of an educational pathologist.

Most of the boys and girls were exposed to the importance of spelling, through the agency of the old-time spelling school held every two or three weeks during the winter term. My boyhood extended over the tallow candle
epoch of civilization. A day or two before the event the teacher asked for a showing of hands of those pupils who would bring a candle. Those candles sharpened to fit into necks or [*sic* of] cone-shaped ink bottles, were placed on every window sill, and on two or three desks. The teacher with a spelling book and candle in hand proceeded to pronounce the words. Before recess the school chose sides. The contest was usually lively because good spellers from other schools came miles to win honors. After half or three-quarters of an hour, recess was announced. For out-of-towners, this meant wrestling and fist fights; indoors, needles-eye-as-I-pass-by and other kissing games. After recess the great contest of "spelling down" occupied another half hour. Then the real honors were conferred, especially if strangers were in the contest. This involved a worth while motive and those who could learn to spell really made progress.

After the spelling down act, speaking pieces was the grand finale. Not infrequently parents attended the spelling school. They came for the same reason that they now attend the movies. The boys and girls often persuaded their parents to share in giving declamations. Many of these performances I easily recall. I greatly enjoy a comedy, a farce, any dramatic performance that involves wit and humor. In all of my years of theatrical enjoyment I have never seen rollicking fun that approximated the spelling school exhibition.

The monotony of rural life was further relieved by the work of the itinerant teacher of vocal music. His class was composed of school pupils and young people not in
school. Once a week a drill was given at the school house, I was "born short" in music. I cannot now, and I never could sing or whistle the simplest melody. Wise men have declared that every normal human being can master the elements of music. Enjoying all forms of good music, I can actually distinguish the good from the bad, I have made a reasonable effort to overcome my musical limitations, and failed utterly. In the eyes of the wise men, I am a musical idiot.

At the age of thirteen, I decided that if father ever paroled me from "serving time" in the district school I would on receiving that parole declare my school education finished. A seemingly trifling event occurred near the approach of my fourteenth birthday. I was sent on an errand to our nearest neighbor. I found the woman of the house overhauling an ancient district school library. My eye caught sight of a small volume entitled the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. I was granted the loan of this book. At this day, I am incapable of explaining why I should have cared to read any book, except under the command of parent or teachers.

I read this book, in fact this is the first book that I ever really read. I enjoyed every page, I was thrilled, I was awakened, I was inspired. I said to myself "why can't I do something worth while?" Fortunately for me, I did not know enough to compare Franklin's brain inheritance with my own. I foolishly assumed that I could do what Franklin had done. From that day I read this wonderful autobiography I was a radically changed boy. I fell in love with biography, became a hero worshipper and for more than half a century have "kept the faith."