

CHAPTER VII

EDUCATION IN LIBERAL

One of the first laws regarding public education in the United States was enacted in 1642. It was called the "Old Deluder Satan Law." The principal reason for this law was to make people literate so that they could read the Bible. Our ancestors in Europe were persecuted for possessing, or reading the Bible. The founders of America did not want to repeat this error. The Bible was, therefore, an integral part of their educational philosophy.

The first college in America was Harvard College in Massachusetts. It was established by the Puritans less than ten years after their arrival in America. The official motto of Harvard was: "For Christ and the Church." One hundred and six of the first one hundred and eight colleges in America were founded on the Christian faith.

George H. Walsler had a different philosophy of education. He founded "The Freethought University," which would pursue education without the Bible. I obtained a catalog to this university from the Western Historical Collection, of the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri.

Walsler wrote in this catalog:

"THE FREETHOUGHT UNIVERSITY offers to the Freethinkers of America the advantages for which they have so long waited. Here the growing, inquiring minds of innocent children, just merging into manhood and womanhood, may be trained and educated free from the chains of superstition and mental slavery that have weighed so long and heavily upon our entire educational system. Here, untrammelled by bible, creed, or ism, the truth will be sought for the truth's sake alone, and the warfare upon error be unflinchingly and unceasingly carried out."

"Liberals of America, for years you have been looking forward to the inauguration of a Freethought institution of learning where creeds and dogmas would cease to wield their poisonous influence over the world . . . Therefore, by all means, let every Liberal who has children to educate send

Liberal, Missouri

them to the Freethought University . . . Liberals, let us not delay our efforts to advance this enterprise. Whatever we may be able to do let us not wait until next month or next year, but let us act immediately . . ."

Walsler continued: "The citizens of Liberal are honest, sober, industrious and moral as a class. They are free from religious dogmatisms of every kind. Every person here is esteemed for his manly bearing rather than his religious faith . . . We expect Liberal to become an educational point, and to that end we invite to our midst all lovers of learning . . ."

O.E. Harmon said that the first educational institution was the "Instructional School." This developed into the Liberal Normal in 1884. Later this merged into The Freethought University. This educational experiment began with seven professors but went down hill almost immediately. In 1886 Clark Braden wrote: "The school never had more than fifteen pupils . . ." Obviously, the Freethought University did not develop into a great center of learning to compete with the Christian colleges back east.

The University of Mental Liberty

O.E. Harmon also described the U.M.L. Hall in his book "The Story of Liberal, Missouri." This book was published by the Liberal News in 1925. Harmon wrote:

"This building was erected for public purposes; the main object being to provide a place where any person could come and speak on any subject providing he kept himself within the rules of parliamentary decorum. It was to be to Liberal what Faneuil Hall was to Boston in old New England days. U.M.L. Hall was the scene of many a fiery debate; and we can easily imagine the diversity of views that would be expressed when Free-thinkers, Spiritualists, and Orthodox Christians aired their opinions.

There was one occasion that deserves notice. It was the Sunday evening before the Presidential election of 1888. The meeting was held in the hall, and the usual liberty of speech was to be allowed, only the speakers were to be limited to ten minutes' time. Mr. G.W. Baldwin was chairman of the meeting. Various persons had spoken, and it came Mr. G.H. Walsler's time to speak. He was brim full of ideas, and when the ten minutes had expired he found he was not nearly through of what he wanted to say; so he kept on talking. Mr. Baldwin called him to order, whereupon Mr. Walsler talked on,

and Mr. Baldwin reminded him that his time was up. Mr. Walser finally quit under protest, but with the deep feeling that liberty of speech had been suppressed.

This was the last public meeting held in the venerable U.M.L. Hall. In the next issue of the paper was the following notice: 'U.M.L. Hall closed for repairs.' The building was soon after sold to the Methodists and used as their place of worship until the new church building was erected a short time ago. The new church was dedicated in 1923.

The above incident is interesting from the fact that Mr. Walser and Mr. Baldwin were leaders in their respective fields of thought. Both were well read men and good speakers. Mr. Baldwin was a strong Agnostic, while Mr. Walser was a strong Spiritualist. Baldwin was a Democrat, Walser was Republican. So it is easy to see that when they came in conflict, either in debate or otherwise, something was doing." (Pages 25-26)

It needs to be noted that the sale of the U.M.L. Hall to the Methodists was a reversal of Walser's previous position. Some attribute this change, not only to a moderating attitude toward Christianity, but also to his arrogance. Mr. Walser owned the hall. The very idea that he would be limited to only ten minutes speaking time in his own building was not to be tolerated. Since the Methodists had been the most evangelistic in attempting to convert the infidels, the sale of the U.M.L. Hall to them, may have seemed a good way to get even.

Freedom of Speech and Thought

The St. Louis Daily Globe Democrat featured an article about Liberal on May 2, 1885, p. 10. It is titled: "An Infidel Experiment." Here is a brief excerpt:

" 'What do you think of Walser?' Mr. Adams was asked. 'I think,' said he, 'he is a man who wants to rule or ruin. He is the worst fanatic I ever saw.'

'But don't you think he is honest in his intentions?'

'No; he is a man who is richer than anybody else around here. He owns the land the people live on, and he has it in his power to make things lively for anyone he doesn't like. He is a lawyer and involves everyone he has a

quarrel with in a lawsuit, compelling them to pay attorney's fees, costs, etc., even if they don't lose the case.'

'But he invites everybody to speak in the U.M.L. Hall.'

'Yes, he invites preachers to hold forth in his hall, but when they attempt to do so he interrupts, bullyrags, contradicts and controverts them until life is a burden to them. Walser, when anyone goes to preach, jumps up every ten minutes and fires questions at him . . . ' "

The same article related that Walser had interrupted a religious meeting outside of the U.M.L. Hall:

"He insisted on criticising and controverting the various points in the sermon of the day, justifying the imposition of his views on the people with the statement that the town was a liberal one, that free speech was accorded everybody, and that he owned one twentieth of the church . . . "

"Nearly one third of the inhabitants of Liberal have moved off of Walser's land and established a town of their own, called Denison. The history of this schism is interesting viewed from any point, and goes to show that men who profess to be infidels and Liberals can be as bigoted and fanatical as the men who in olden times applied rack and screw to those who would not believe and practice with them . . . "

Waggoner's Addition

O.E. Harmon relates this story on pages 15-16 of his book:

"In 1881, one H. H. Waggoner made an addition to Liberal with the view of getting a place where Orthodox Christians could live to themselves. Here they could live unmolested and watch with contempt the doings of their infidel neighbors. But alas! Their joy was to be short lived. A wicked barbed wire fence did the mischief. An account of the building of the fence is given in the newspaper, 'The Liberal,' of April 18, 1883, and is as follows:

'G.H. Walser has bought the Waggoner's addition to the town of Liberal. The readers of the Liberal two years ago will remember that this addition

GEORGE H. WALSER

was the great bone of contention between the Liberals and the Christians. The addition was laid out by Mr. Waggoner for the purpose of inducing immigration of Christians who would be strong enough to out number the Liberals and defeat the enterprise. That was prevented by a high post and barbed-wire fence which was immediately put on a strip of land adjoining the town which had been laid off into lots, which they mistook for a street. By this fence they could neither get ingress nor egress. They could not climb over the fence because it was too high; they could not crawl under it because it was too low; and could not crawl through it because of the stickers on the wires. So they just sat down and swore that we were the meanest set on earth, and we guess we were. We saved the town by it and now we are happy."

Clark Braden wrote:

"When some persons who would not submit to the infidel bulldozing began to settle on the lots that Mr. Walser did not own, outside his town plot, the infidels of Liberal actually undertook to build a wire fence around Liberal, across a public highway so as to prevent Christians from entering the town, even to go to the depot. One Monday morning all Liberal could be seen at work, digging holes, carrying posts and wire and putting up this evidence of infidel 'tolerance' and 'liberality.' Walser's wife and other female infidels were driving down stakes as ostentatiously as possible. The railroad authorities telegraphed that they would remove the depot if the lunacy was not abandoned, and that freak of infidel lunacy removed."

J.P. Moore wrote:

"Knowing Mr. Walser as I did, it is my opinion that he alone conceived and financed the building of the fence; and that it was built in a gesture of contempt, and more as a psychological than a physical barrier. As to how well it actually worked, we now have as evidence only the conflicting stories of Mr. Walser and Mr. Braden on which to base our judgment. Anyway, the fence is long since gone and so are the principals involved."

It appears that there was not as much freedom of expression and thought in Liberal, as liberal people might suppose. Dean Rusk offers this insight:

Liberal, Missouri

GEORGE H. WALSER

"Free speech and free press are not based on the notion that everyone is going to tell the truth. From John Milton through Thomas Jefferson, and up to the present time, the right of free speech and free press is based upon the notion that if everyone is free to say and write what he pleases, then the truth has a better chance to emerge than if these processes were subject to some sort of external control, particularly control by the government."

Liberal, Missouri

Page Number 31