School Girls of 1850*

Having noticed in some of the recent publications illustrations and descriptions of the luxurious surroundings of college girls of the present day, I am tempted to tell them something of their mother's and grandmothers' college days. To be sure, my knowledge is confined entirely to some western colleges or "Seminaries" as training schools for young ladies were called in those days. By "those days", I mean from about the years 1840 to 1855; or I could tell them of my grandmother's school days in 1800, when she was taken by her father, an officer of the revolution, from her home in Western Pennsylvania on a mule, over the Allegheny Mountains, her father riding beside her and two attendants following behind, with her wardrobe, packed in paniers, a blue satin pelisse being one of the articles, which I remember she never forgot to speak of as having been very much mussed by the close packing. She attended a school at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, kept by Moravian Sisters, where in addition to the usual branches of English, she was taught to cook, sweep, embroider beautifully, paint in oils and play on the piano, and they must have been most thoroughly taught, for when she was eighty-five years old, she could still play "The White Cockade", "Over the River to Charlie", and "The Battle of Prague", these pieces having apparently sufficed for all the time between her school days and old age.

But to leave the reminiscences of my grandmother and return to what I know myself. In the neighborhood of Pittsburgh was a large and fashionable Seminary known as Edgeworth Ladies Seminary. It was at first established in Braddock's Field, that historic spot, by an English woman, Mrs. Olver, or as she was always affectionately

*Mr. Walter R. Marvin, of Larchmont, New York, furnished the manuscript—"written some years ago by my mother-in-law, Mrs. William A. Collins now deceased. She was a sister of Mrs. James B. Oliver of Pittsburgh and many descendants of the Shields family are residents of Sewickley Valley and members of the Historical Society. The manuscript is a description of some of her experiences as a school girl when as Eliza Leet Shields, she attended the Edgeworth Ladies Seminary about the year 1850. The manuscript is the property of my sister-in-law Mme. Anna De Chiara of Villa Giulia, Anacapri, Italy, who is Mrs. Collins' daughter."
Schoolgirls of 1850

called, Mother Olver. There was a Mr. Olver but being, I suppose, a nonentity he was not called Father Olver but Daddy Olver. Alas! I am afraid girls had as little respect for age in those days as the present. This school prospered and remained at Braddock's for many years when its growing demands forced Mother Olver to purchase land, and build a more commodious house some fifteen miles below Pittsburgh, on the Ohio River, in the beautiful Sewickley Valley. But the enjoyment of her new possessions was brief, as she died shortly after its establishment there, and it passed into the hands of the Reverend Daniel Nevin a brother of Dr. John Nevin of Franklin and Marshall College of Lancaster, and of others of the name, more or less noted in professional and literary realms of the east. There it was that I got my personal knowledge of Seminary life. There the grandmothers and mothers of most of the prominent families of Western Pennsylvania and Ohio received their education, indeed such was its reputation that many from Eastern Pennsylvania and New York were sent there.

The building itself was a large stone structure with wings on either end. (The wings were of frame work.) Both front and back of the stone building were long porches with pillars supporting the roof in old colonial style. It presented a very imposing appearance from all sides.

It was situated some hundred yards from the river—which was not visible—and fronted on the public road. The very extensive grounds were beautifully laid out and kept. They sloped gradually to a little stream over which was a rustic bridge and along the banks of which grew very closely, willow trees, their long graceful branches constantly waving with every breath of air. The carriage drive and foot paths wound in graceful curves down to this bridge, and over it to the road, over which passed the stages and waggons on their way between Pittsburgh and the West. For it was not for some years after that a rail road was built west of Pittsburgh. The only transportation was by means of private carriage, stage once a day, or steam boat, which while being the most delightful, was uncertain owing to the stage of the water.

Stretching out to the back and side, was a large apple orchard, a favorite resort of the girls, where ensconced in
the branches of a tree, with a lap full of apples either green or ripe, and a book in her hand. She would study her lessons or perhaps read and weep over one of Grace Augusta's novels.

In contrast to the beautiful grounds, and the imposing exterior of the building, the interior was crude, bare and uninviting. A broad hall ran through the centre building from porch to porch, on either side of which were large rooms—"The Study", parlor, and music rooms. The Study or Principal's private room, was "Blue Beard's Chamber" of the establishment, dreaded by all, for there we were sent by the teachers when their reproofs were unavailing, and although we came out with our heads on our shoulders we felt as though they had been taken off.

The lower floors of the wings were devoted, one to the kitchen, dining room and private sitting room of the family, and the other to the class rooms. These were three large rooms separated by folding doors, which were thrown open every morning for prayers and twice a year for public examinations.

Every morning at nine o'clock a large bell called to prayers. When the hundred or more pupils assembled, a chapter of the Bible was read and a short prayer offered, or if it was necessary a lecture or reproof delivered, after which the doors were closed and each room devoted to a class. (There were smaller class rooms in other parts of the house.) In these, the principal class rooms, the floors were bare and the windows devoid of blinds. Along the sides of the wall were wooden desks painted green where we kept our books, slates, etc. In the centre was a long broad table, also green, along either side of which were narrow benches without backs, on which we sat during recitations, the teacher sitting in a chair at the end. I suppose our backs must have ached, sitting there so long without any support, but if so, the memory of it has passed away. We sat there nearly the whole day, for our hours were very different from the present school hours.

The year was divided into two terms, the Summer term beginning the first of May, and ending the last of September, and the Winter term beginning the first of November and ending the last of March, thus giving us the
months of April and October, with a week at Christmas for vacation. The rising bell rang at half past five or six in the morning and breakfast was at half past six; from half past seven till half past eight all assembled in the large rooms for study, where one or more of the teachers kept order. At nine, school began and continued until twelve, when we had dinner and perhaps a breathing spell in the open air. At one o'clock in winter and at two o'clock in summer, back again to classes until four or five; then an hour or so for recreation—strolling through the grounds or romping and climbing trees in the orchard, perhaps a long walk on the road, walking in a procession two and two with an argus eyed teacher at either end. At six o'clock we had supper, and from seven till eight or half past study again. At nine the great bell rang for bedtime.

Three quarters of an hour was allowed for each class. The pupils sat around the large tables and closing their books laid them on the table. The teacher then put questions to each one, skipping about as she pleased; we knew nothing of writing our lessons as it is done now; each question must be answered immediately and if not correct, a mark was given. There were black boards for classes in mathematics and each one had to take turns at it.

In grammar, the parts of speech, the rules, the adverbs, adjectives, etc., etc., were committed to memory, and then we began parsing, which was done by taking first some easy sentence and each pupil parsing a word. Then something more difficult, until we were considered sufficiently advanced to take up "Milton's Paradise Lost" which was the acme of our ambition, and the end of our lessons in grammar.

Our Wednesdays and Saturdays were only half school days, the afternoons being holidays. The Saturday morning session was devoted to the reading of "compositions". The large rooms were opened, all the pupils assembled, the Principal took his seat and profound silence reigned, when he would call upon one of the young ladies to read her "composition". I should say that one half the pupils read one Saturday, the others next. The poor girl trembling and scared stood up and read her trite little essay after which she handed it to the Principal, who looking over his spectacles, began at one end and going all around the room asked
each girl if she had any remarks to make. Sometimes some criticisms were made, generally not, then he looked it over, pointed out the awkward constructions, grammatical errors and incorrect spelling. Rather embarrassing, but I suppose improving. Sometimes instead of the usual essay we were given letters to write to imaginary friends, describing a walk recently taken, or our life at school, or something practical of that sort.

At nine o'clock at night when the bell rang for bedtime, there was a general scurry for our rooms, not that we were so anxious for sleep, but it was the preliminary to the good time to come after the lights were put out at ten o'clock.

The rooms, as I look back upon them now, were the most bare, uncomfortable, unhomelike looking places imaginable. Whitewashed walls, scribbled over with names, bare floors, green paper blinds at the windows which were rolled up and tied with a string, two beds. two girls to each bed, a strip of carpet beside each bed, four straight wooden chairs, a high mantle piece with a solitary candle on it, for lighting the room at night; four trunks and a few hooks on the doors on which to hang some of our clothes. No bureaus, no wash stand. How could the college girl of today with her luxurious couch and wealth of pillows, her pictures and knick knacks exist in such a room? The absence of wash stands in the rooms, resulted from there being a large dressing room downstairs, where there was plenty of running water, towels, and all necessary arrangements for the toilet. But Oh! it was so cold, going down the cold stairs through unheated halls. No wonder we jumped about and clapped our hands to get warm afterwards. Some years after however, there were arrangements made in the rooms for the toilet. In each room, there was one delight, and that was a grate for a soft coal fire, and plenty of coal provided. And Oh! the jolly times we had after the lights were put out at ten o'clock and relighted after the monitors round, when chickens and roasting ears were smuggled in, perhaps stolen from some neighboring farmer. And taffy made on that coal fire, smoked and scorched most likely, but so delicious. Most of our nights were spent in this way, and why we were never sick passes
comprehension, eating so much trash and going through those cold halls to the cold dressing room, perhaps the thermometer below zero. It would kill the girl of today. But I never remember any of them to be seriously ill, perhaps we were harder then, or perhaps only the strong daughters were sent to boarding school, I cannot account for it.

At the close of each session, Spring and Fall, there was a public examination, when all the relatives and friends were expected to be present. These examinations lasted two days, and were very great events. The night intervening between these two days was devoted to a concert at which the most advanced pupils in music sang and played. There was a stage erected at one end of the large rooms for the concert, and on which the classes were to be seated. The examinations began by the calisthenics class coming in robed in white muslin, with wreaths of ivy on their heads meandering in and out in some intricate figure, clapping of hands, waving of arms, and other maneuvers, then winding out as they came in. After which a class was called.

We took our position on the stage facing the audience. The Principal informed the assembly how far we had progressed in that particular study, and taking a book, held it out, asking “if any one in the audience would be kind enough to take the book and question the young ladies”. There was never wanting some clergyman or Professor of some rival school to take advantage of this, and try, and generally succeed in confusing us, so that really bright girls appeared like dunces. If it were a class in Arithmetic, Algebra, or Geometry, there was a black board on the stage, where whoever was called upon had to demonstrate any problem or example which might be given. Between each class a “composition” was read, or a piece of music played, a duet for four hands, or a solo, probably variations on the “Last Rose of Summer”, or “The Carnival de Venice”, or variations on some theme, as that was the fashionable style of music then.

At the closing of the exercises on the second day a valedictory was read by one of the graduates, at which of course all the pupils were dissolved in tears, and sobs could be heard through the audience. They were very pathetic!
Then the Principal stepped forward with a handful of diplomas, each rolled up and tied with a blue ribbon, written on sheepskin, with a large seal of red wax attached. One was delivered to each graduate with some good advice, and touching remarks. Congratulations were received and farewells were said, and the exercises for that term were over.

The Rev. Mr. Nevin's health becoming impaired at the end of some seven or eight years he was compelled to retire from the management of the Edgeworth Ladies Seminary, and was succeeded by the Rev. Mr. Wilson, who after a few years was succeeded by Rev. Mr. Williams, under whose administration it was burned down.

It was never rebuilt, as the completion of rail roads East and West rendered access to Eastern Schools possible, or the rapidly increasing population of the Sewickley Valley, rendered it a less desirable place for such an institution.

An Edgeworth Graduate.