SCHOOLMASTER—EARLY WESTERN MODEL

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Poor Christopher Frederick Schewe was a doctor of many trades but a master of none. He held six diplomas but he could not make a living. Tutor, preacher, schoolmaster, portrait painter, shopkeeper, he succeeded at nothing. Prussian, set down in a town of French and Americans, traveler, and philosopher, he serves well enough as one model of the teacher in the early West. There were better teachers, no doubt, but there were not many who had his experience or his knowledge or his strange variety; nor were there many who were as misfitted as he. His career, as Henry Marie Brackenridge records it in his *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West*, was so fantastic that were it not confirmed by advertisements in the St. Louis newspaper of that time, one would simply credit Schewe to the imagination of the Pennsylvanian.

Of his origin little is known. He told Brackenridge—who has been his only biographer—that he had begun a life of travel by making a tour of Europe as tutor to young Count Feltenstein. He had arrived in Paris in time for the first explosion of the Revolution and was shot in the leg at the taking of the Bastille (apparently he delighted in showing the scar left by his wound). He was full of stories, too, about Frederick the Great and his generals. But there are no specific details concerning his first years.

Brackenridge became acquainted with the eccentric Prussian about 1806 when he studied German with him. At that time Schewe was also teaching French at the Pittsburgh Academy and officiating as a preacher, but his piety made no better impression on Brackenridge than his choice of profession years before had made on his father. He told Brackenridge that “when he first proposed to his father to let him study divinity, the old man indignantly said to him: ‘You be a minister!—you rashkel, you have not an ounce of minister’s flesh on your rashkelly pones.’ ” Why Schewe went to Pittsburgh his biographer does not tell us, but he did not remain there long; between 1807 and 1809 he gave up preach-
ing and left for the West. Fortescue Cuming, who stopped in Pittsburgh from February to mid-July, 1807, discovered that "Mr. Sheva [sic], pastor of a congregation of German Lutherans, is a man of liberal morality and a lively social companion." Brackenridge declared that the German renounced the pulpit from a conscientious belief that he was not suited to it.

Schewe was in St. Louis early in 1809, for on January 11 of that year the first advertisement of his "French & English Grammar School" appeared in the *Missouri Gazette*. The announcement (in English and French) of this former "Professor in the Lycée Academy at Paris" and late "Minister of the Gospel at Pittsburgh" had a persuasive sound:

The subscriber begs leave to inform the respectable inhabitants of St. Louis, that he intends to establish a School in town, in which will be taught the French and English languages grammatically, both the French to the English, the English to the French.

He has a particular method in teaching, by which he has taught a number of years to the advantage and satisfaction of all his scholars; his experience and success has provided him with testimonials that his scholars have always excelled in the sixth part of the time that those who have been instructed in the old way have taken, and to speak with fluency and ease; his pupils have found this method more amusing and agreeable, none have complained of being overloaded with rules and fatigued by the dryness of the theory, notwithstanding the scholar finds himself in full possession of them all in the sixth part of the time as aforesaid, they are in such an insensible manner employed with the practice that the scholar can never forget them, it eases him in speaking so that he does not stand in as much need to think so much on the rules in speaking as on the object of his discourse—finally, experience will prove the fact—those who may honor the subscriber with their confidence and exertions in making up a school, for which purpose he respectfully recommends himself both to the French and English, and promises full satisfaction.

On request the subscriber will likewise teach Arithmetick, Geography, Geometry, and any other branch of the Mathematicks, likewise Drawing, as well from Free-hand as Architecture Cyvilis and Military.

He will with pleasure bear examination by competent persons, in order to avoid suspicion of a want of talents.

His school will commence as soon as a sufficient number of pupils are procured, so that he may with confidence look for a comfortable support from it.

He will immediately open an Evening School from 7 to 9 o'Clock for grown persons, whose occupation may prevent their attendance at the Day School, he would be willing to employ his leisure hours in giving particular lessons.

He lodges at present at John Coons Esq. Coppersmith.
Apparently he drew enough pupils; for a card in the *Missouri Gazette* on February 1 gave notice of the opening of his school at Mr. Alvarez’ house, near the church, on the sixth of the month.

Nothing more is reported of Schewe until nearly a year later. He then announced in the *Louisiana Gazette* (January 4, 1810) that he would continue to give lessons in French both at his lodgings and in the homes of those who might employ him. “He flatters himself that having heretofore enjoyed the patronage of the citizens of St. Louis, by which his talents have been made known, that he will be equally encouraged in the future.” He did not depend entirely, however, on the proceeds of his teaching, for in this advertisement he informed “the public at large” that he had “a quantity of Candles, Moulded from the best Deers tallow, on hand, which he will sell cheap for cash.”

It was in June, 1810, that Brackenridge arrived in St. Louis for the first time, and among the first persons whom he sought out was his “old preceptor.” He tells of the mingled joy and pain of that meeting—what a change there had been!

Instead of the black-coated, ruffle-shirted, and silk-stockinged (and well-shapen was that leg, and well did its owner know) professor of the French and German languages, and sometime pastor of the Dutch Lutheran church, I beheld a little man with a high forehead and bald—the head of a sage, adorned with grizzly locks, standing in his shirt sleeves, meanly half clad, behind a sort of counter, and surrounded with barrels and boxes, and things of all sorts on shelves, in a very dirty shop filled with a commingled smell of fish, molasses, soap, and onions. But the meeting was not the less joyous on his part; he leapt from behind his counter, threw his arms around me, and applied his unshaven, and perhaps unwashed face, to mine, with a warmth of affection which I could have readily excused. And then he capered, and danced, and sung, and laughed, and cried. In truth I was always among the few who could appreciate the merits of Shewe. He was an original—but that was not all; with many things to render him ridiculous, and very little to command the respect of society, he had some qualities in the eyes of a man above prejudice, and who does not scorn to pick up a gem out of a humble place, which caused him to be better thought of, than a better man.

Brackenridge spent much time in the huckster shop of the eccentric German for the pleasure of hearing him talk and the purpose of whetting his own faculties. In a small back room Schewe kept a curious collection of books, some chemical apparatus, and mineralogical specimens. Though
the American found him "not very perfect in anything," Schewe "pretended to have some acquaintance with every subject." He had read a great deal, although superficially, and he had traveled widely. His mind, it seems, "was stored with original and profound observations," and everything was spiced by his love of humor and "a certain grotesque character [which] was imparted by his singular language, a mixture of German, a little Latin, bad French, and worse English," a mixture which "rendered it unintelligible to most persons, but which to me only made it the more piquant and graphic."

The young Pittburgher learned that Schewe, for a time after his arrival in the West, had practiced as a painter of miniatures (whether this was before the establishment of the school in 1809 or following is not clear). He understood drawing and could do passable landscapes, apparently, but "his attempts on the human countenance, to say the least, were not successful, being deplorably deficient in resemblance, and the coloring execrable." Apparently Brackenridge must have seen some examples; for the artist could not sell some of the works he considered his best. Brackenridge describes then the revenge that Schewe indulged in:

He took a large sheet of paper, drew a circle in the center of it, and then surrounded this circle with the most hideous figures he could conceive,—devils with horns and pitchforks, dragons with forked tongues, crocodiles with open jaws, and other monstrous things, and which was then stuck on the wall. In the midst of these, in the open space, he placed the unfortunate portrait which happened to be disowned: "Tere you rashkel, paff, shtay in PURGATORIUM until I have can get my ten tallars, you rashkel, paff—tere ish no retemption, you neet not go to te priest, he cannot you take out fon dat place—paff, te voila coquin; tere you must shtay, and if you dont pring te money soon by and by, tere is an oder place, paff—fiel varmer, mit primshtone and fire!" This was followed up by one of his tremendous cachinatory explosions; which showed much more gratification at the contemplation of his own humor and ingenuity than malignity of revenge.

All this time, according to Brackenridge, Schewe, a failure at painting, had been maintaining himself by a small shop where he sold "beer, soap, candles, salt-fish, and a variety of other huckstery," but had not ceased "to be the same philosopher, original genius, and inimitable jester" he had always been. The idea came to Brackenridge that he could raise Schewe in the estimation of the public by conferring upon him the title
of "Doctor." To the objections raised, the young man explained that Schewe would be
merely assuming his proper rank, when every one was endeavoring to obtain
titles to which they had no just claim, while he was a scholar, a chemist, a
painter, a divine, a philosopher, a professor of languages, raised and educated
as a gentleman, while many of those who were figuring away as great men,
had been originally shoeblacks, hostlers, constables, negro traders, gamblers,
and horsejockeys. He appeared to feel the justice of my remarks, and after
some persuasion—"Paff, you shall see my diplomas, I have six from ten, four
in Latin—one from the Eliziac Acatemy from Paris, one from a colleche from
Perlin, one from te shool of Mines from Saxony, one from te free mason
society." "Enough, my friend," said I, "you have enough to doctorize the
whole town of St. Louis. I will take a turn or two around the town, and by
to-morrow you shall be known as Doctor Shewe, and no one will stop to in-
quire whether you are a doctor of laws, of medicine, or divinity." This was
accordingly done by me; I spoke of him to about a dozen persons as Doctor
Shewe; in two days he was universally known by that title, and I had the
satisfaction to perceive that he was spoken to after this by persons who scarcely
took notice of him before.

Brackenridge has nothing more to tell of Schewe at this time save to
recall that when the young Pennsylvanian left St. Louis in the fall of
1811 the German, bringing a basket of apples for a present, fell and
cut himself. "I had other friends," wrote Brackenridge, "but none more
sincere and true than this kind-hearted, inoffensive old man."

We must return to the Missouri Gazette for further news of Schewe.
On November 27, 1813, he had "removed to the house of Mr. P. Lee,
two doors below Mr. Kerr's store, where he proposes to teach the Ger-
man, French and English languages." He was still dealing in molded
candles at the "usual price." For three years more there is no further
news until on November 30, 1816, he tendered "his most hearty thanks
to a generous public for the liberal patronage he has hitherto received,
and pledges himself to those who may be inclined to learn any of those
languages he is in the habit of teaching, (particularly French) that their
confidence shall not be misplaced. The greatest punctuality will be ob-
served abroad as well as at his lodgings in Mde. Honore's house Second
street."

The tenor of these advertisements suggests that there may have been
some exaggeration in Brackenridge's account of the miseries and misfor-
tunes of Schewe, and it is strange that that writer should not have been aware of any teaching activity on the older man’s part during the year and a half that they were both living in St. Louis. The tone of mild success in his school announcements seems to be confirmed by the fact that he subscribed for three shares ($300) in the stock of the Bank of Missouri incorporated on February 1, 1817; whether he ever paid for the stock is unknown, but there is at least an air of prosperity and expectation in his gesture.

Two years later, on September 22, 1819, St. Louis residents were informed that a “French Evening School will be opened by CHRISTOPHER FREDERICK SCHWE, as soon as a sufficient number of scholars have subscribed, to defray the expense of a convenient room.” School was to meet from 6:30 p. m. to 9:30. It was announced, too, that a “residence of sixteen years by C.F.S. in this place, enables the stranger to obtain from the citizens any further information as to his CONCISE PLAN of teaching the French language.” Actually Schewe could not have been more than twelve years in St. Louis, since he was still preaching in Pittsburgh in the summer of 1807. That, however, can be considered an unintentional error.

On the twentieth of October Schewe announced that at his night school he would form three classes: for beginners, for those with some proficiency, and for those with a tolerable knowledge of grammar but in need of correct pronunciation. Apparently they would all meet in the same room at the same time, for “each class will be so arranged that it will derive considerable benefit from the other.” For this instruction he charged $2.50 per month. The proposed school was still advertised in these terms on the twenty-seventh of October—with what success is unknown.

Now once more Brackenridge appeared on the scene and, if he is to be believed, was again the deus ex machina. He relates that in the fall of 1820 he had great difficulty in finding Schewe in St. Louis, “for he had almost passed away from the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and was but a fossil as respected the new.” The story loses nothing in the telling! “I found him, after considerable search, in a back alley, the occupant of a miserable board shanty, without floor or windows, and in the lowest
degree of poverty and destitution, and almost in rags. He was, of course, surprised, and expressed as much joy as the low condition of his mind and body would allow. After giving him temporary help, Brackenridge left. Apparently a few evenings later the writer made another descent upon his old friend:

Procuring a lantern, I waded through mud on my devious way to his cabin, and pushing open the door, for it had no lock, found him in his bunk dozing among his buffalo skins or robes as they are called. He seemed at first indifferent to the intrusion; having no fear of robbers, as he had nothing to be robbed of, and to murder him would be doing him a favor. Being roused and made to put on his duds and old surtout, he was led out, as it were, as a prisoner. Passing near a barber’s shop, the operation of shaving and ablution was performed; and then at my room he underwent the disguise of a clean shirt, and such garments as I could spare. The next thing was to order a supper from a neighboring restaurant, with bottles of ale. The half-starved, and half-forgotten, and half-frozen philosopher was placed before a comfortable table, along with me as my guest. After the first glass or two of ale, and feeling the warmth of the fire, and unexpected transition, the effect was as if some magician had suddenly waved his wand over the scene. ‘Shewes was himself again.’ His heart was unlocked—the next day my resuscitated friend, in his disguise, was introduced to some of my acquaintance as Professor Shewes, from Berlin; which I could safely do, for he had diplomas both from Berlin and from Paris. He was soon better lodged, and had French scholars, or rather Americans desirous of learning French,—among others, Mr. Benton, afterward a distinguished member of the U. S. Senate.

The principal sources for the life of Frederick Schewe do not entirely agree, but we can see the possibility of adjustment between them if we allow for a tendency to overwrite on the part of Brackenridge and remember that he wrote his account many years after the events. Two more incidents concerning his life remain to be noted. In Paxton’s Directory of St. Louis (1821) Schewe was listed as a “painter and glazier” residing on South Church Street, above C. And in the fall of that year Schewe went to Pensacola where Brackenridge was then a judge. There the German found with his friend a refuge from the yel-
low fever that had broken out in the town. For a time he had some French pupils, but not for long. His death Brackenridge reported with some literary flourish:

For some days I had observed a strange expression in his countenance. In the cool of the evening he set out to take a walk on the smooth beach. It was late, and he did not return. We proceeded to look for him, fearful that something might have happened; we shouted and fired guns in vain. There came on a terrific storm of wind and rain, which continued the greater part of the night. The next morning, which was without a cloud, the search was resumed. When looking up, high, high in the empyrean, three specs were seen circling each other—it was ominous, and I knew its meaning. The gyrations became nearer and nearer, until a vulture lighted on a tree. We hastened to the spot; and there, his umbrella on one side and his Bible on the other, lay all that was mortal of Frederick Shewel!