THE McCracken School

Robert D. Christie

A separate and distinct chapter in the history of Allegheny is that of the select school for girls and boys established on Ridge Avenue in the First Ward about 1878. Its sponsors and principal-teachers were the Misses Eliza and Sarah J. McCracken, and it was known as the McCracken School. The street number of their establishment originally was 366, later changed to 611. It was the house at the western end of a row of six three-story residences named the Paulson Block after a former owner, Charles H. Paulson, dealer in hats, caps and furs at 73 Wood Street, Pittsburgh. The buildings of which this school was a part rose abruptly from the street and offered a pleasing view of the park to the north, but a less pleasing topographical feature was that the entire school-side of the block faced the depressed tracks of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad across a narrow unused lot. An iron bridge permitted the public to cross those tracks at street level on Ridge Avenue. It might be supposed that the noise and smoke of passing trains would have deterred the location of a fashionable school there, but the pupils literally took it in their stride, often running to stand on the bridge facing approaching trains and being enveloped in sulphurous smoke and showers of cinders.

The first mention of Eliza McCracken in a Pittsburgh and Allegheny directory appeared in the volume for 1878. Her sister Sarah never was listed until the issue for 1890. The "select school" of Miss Eliza disappeared from the directories in 1896. It was from Steubenville, Ohio, that the McCracken ladies and their brother, John H., a clerk in the employ of the Pennsylvania Company in the '90s, came.

In the middle '80s the institutional staff of the McCracken School included, besides the two sisters, a widow whose name was Mrs. Nannie Ridgley, who probably had lived at 67 Arch Street, Allegheny; Miss Margareta Dihm, who subsequently had a private school at 3 North Avenue; and Miss Bertha Floersheim, who almost certainly was a daughter of Berthold Floersheim, 104 Western Avenue. The last mentioned of these ladies became the wife of City Councilman

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Enoch Rauh and the mother of Richard S. Rauh, founder of the latter-day Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and of the Pittsburgh Playhouse, and a director in many Western Pennsylvania corporations as well as a trustee of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Tuition in the McCracken School was sixty dollars a year. The number of pupils at any given time was about sixty. Hours of instruction were from nine in the morning until noon, Monday to Friday inclusive. The final period of each week was devoted to a special student activity at which parents were welcome to attend. Miss Eliza greeted pupils in person at the front door. She presided over the senior classes, seated in a swivel chair which was, indeed, her throne. As a child psychologist she was unquestionably a superior person and as a disciplinarian she definitely was without a peer. The pupils too had their points in psychology, learning by practice to appraise at the entrance to the school the emotional weather they might expect inside. If Miss Eliza were cheery, all was well, but if not, one's breathing scarcely was permitted to be heard. When she admitted a headache, the day was termed "silent" and no one spoke, every pupil having recourse to writing. On normal days recitations were silenced automatically by the passing of locomotives on the Fort Wayne, and the school regularly was showered with cinders but the dirt was unnoticed by Miss Eliza's charges.

The first exercise of each day consisted of Scripture reading in which pupils as well as teachers participated. Naturally, the three R's were basic, with Miss Eliza specializing in grammar with emphasis being placed on parsing in a form of game, more familiar in spelling bees, in which the pupils were seated on open benches at the front of the room and moving up or down as answers justified.

A specialty of Miss Dihm, remembered as a gentle and not too exacting person, was mental arithmetic, which successively involved addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, applied to a single problem. One of her pupils, who enjoyed her special favor, was Ed Thaw; and in a bedlam of answers she frequently was heard to say, "Now, listen to Ed."

Miss Floersheim, regarded with great popularity, was instructor in elocution, and a matter to which she devoted much effort involved a gesture whose value was enhanced by the idea that it had been imported from Paris. This consisted of a sweep of a hand, partly open, but the essential feature, supposed to give it grace and elegance, lay in the separation of the second and third fingers, while the others remained in contact. Her instruction registered to such an extent that
after sixty-seven years one of her pupils, though unconvinced of its artistry, still could demonstrate it. On Fridays, at eleven A.M., a chosen group of pupils was called upon to display their histrionic abilities not only before the school but often before their parents. The field of endeavor was divided into four categories of which each pupil, advised in advance, might make selection — namely: (1) Recitation of a selection of prose or poem from memory; (2) Selection, a chosen reading; (3) Facts, the narration of actual occurrences; (4) Anecdotes, stories of a biographical nature.

These exercises were not without their occasional surprises. One of the McMurtry boys — Ed or Burt — was capable of performances looked forward to with expectation of originality and he did not fail. His entire declamation, devoid of gesture, could be: "It rained Friday. That is a fact." The same young man is remembered as the youthful genius who applied his newly acquired knowledge of electricity to wiring the kitchen doorknob in order that he, having provoked his playmates to pursuit, could dart through and slam the door so that it offered a surprising shock to any youngster who grasped it. He also was the inventor of a form of bicycle which departed from all accepted standards in that it had a small wheel in front and handlebars which were behind the rider seated upright.

On another Friday a performer presented a descriptive bit which included a takeoff of the names of physicians, such as Dr. Thinman, an authority on diet, and Dr. Merriman, whose name was a signal for hearty laughter, to which Miss Eliza, not having followed the narrator closely, called an instant halt, demanding the cause of such mirth. When it was explained that the script called for merriment, she responded: "I understand. Proceed with your laughter" — which was then impossible.

Another pupil, George Thompson by name, acquired a reputation which did not exactly endear him to the school at large. It was alleged that he never was late and that he never missed a day's attendance. What he may have lacked in scholarship was, in the estimation of certain teachers, compensated for by this virtue and when his academic errors were about to incur the derision of fellow students Miss Eliza solemnly would say: "Remember, George has never been late!"

There once was some intimation that the pupils might find a calendar helpful at school, with the result that Al Bissell promptly brought a huge one to be hung on the wall of the study room. In modern times such a calendar would seem appropriate enough, but not so in those days. Al's contribution peremptorily was ruled out on
the ground that if all pupils were to be allowed to bring in such calendars the whole wall soon would be completely covered with them.

Somewhat novel was a bulletin board consisting of a slate and pencil outside the study door. If a pupil had occasion to leave the room, his name was inscribed thereon to be erased when he returned. This gave his absence official sanction without undue notice or discussion.

A two-way flag was used as an incentive to inspire girls or boys as the case might be. One side of it was blue and the other side was red, and if the girls had excelled on a given day the blue side was displayed while if the boys were deserving of commendation the red side was exposed to the student body as a signal of masculine superiority.

No search for a record book of the McCracken School students has been successful but among the names of pupils recalled are:

- Oliver McClintock
- Marshall Bell
- Arthur Bell
- Dallas Byers
- Alex Byers
- John Frederick Byers
- Ed Byers
- Margaret Thaw
- Ed Thaw
- Jo Thaw
- Julia Horne
- Amy Scaife
- George Thompson
- Mary Bell
- Al Bissel
- Henrietta Logan
- Austin Moorhead
- Sarah Lindsay
- Olive Fleming
- Harmar Denny
- Alex Laughlin
- Louise Woods

- Blaine Robinson
- Bill Robinson
- Frank Houston
- Mary Painter
- John Ricketson
- Lily Palmer
- Annie Rhodes
- Alan Wood
- Carroll Fitzhugh
- Mary Laughlin
- Agnes Dickson
- Martha Dalzell
- Anna Scott
- Eleanor Painter
- Gladys Painter
- Marian Chambers
- George B. Logan
- Katherine Scott
- Hester H. Singer
- Bessie C. Hamilton
- Ed McMurtry
- Burt McMurtry

In 1949 Anna Scott wrote: "The row of houses where the school was located was very old . . . My impression of the schoolrooms [is]
that they were very dark. There was a large front room on the second floor, where most of the students sat. Then we went down two or three stairs into the back room where a Mrs. Fulton presided over the little children. On the third floor front there was a smaller room for the older students. I do not remember the teacher in charge there, though I think she was very popular.

"I think the year I attended . . . must have been 1893 because I remember Miss McCracken went to the World's Fair in Chicago and gave us a very vivid report of it."

This account of the McCracken School is basically a result of interviews with Carroll Fitzhugh and John Ricketson.

Neighbors of the McCracken Select School, 366 Ridge Avenue, Allegheny, Pennsylvania, as listed in *The Pittsburgh and Allegheny Blue Book* for 1887:

Joseph Albree, 191
Ann and Martha Bakewell, 334
Mrs. A. W. Bell, 294
William S. Bissell, 302
James Stuart Brown, 346
G. S. Bryan, 374
E. M. Byers, 324
E. C. Converse, 223
Prof. James E. Culliton, 314
J. Willis Dalzell, 216
W. P. DeArmit, 282
Harmar D. Denny, 177
John Bell Elder, 226
Daniel Euwer, 352
Gen. Charles Lane Fitzhugh, 340
Mrs. G. K. Gamble, 284
Abram Garrison, 218
Mrs. Malcolm Hay, 338
Mrs. Richard Hays, 324
Roland J. Hemmick, 272
Levi Howard, 164
Miss Bessie C. Howe, 224
Emily and Mary Hunnings, 366
Prof. W. H. Jeffers, 318
Rev. Dr. W. F. Johnson, 314
Prof. Byron W. King, 368
Mrs. J. W. Lake, 175
Edward P. Logan, 181
George B. Logan, 183
David M. Long, 205
J. Patton Lyon, 179
Charles S. and Clara E. McCargo, 162
George F. McCleane, 346
W. L. McClintock and Master Ollie, 222
James B. McFadden, 189
Christian Ihmsen McKee, 226
H. Sellers McKee, 230
Sarah L. and Carrie Magee, 280
A. M. Marshall, 294
Harrison D. Mason, 162
Reuben Miller, Jr., 211
John M. Montgomery, 284
Henry W. Oliver, Jr., Ridge at Grant
C. A. Oudra, 274
W. Wallace Patrick, 226
Mrs. Henry W. Patterson, 276
A. S. Phillips, 344
Oliver O. Phillips, 192
John H. Ricketson, 220
Mrs. Nannie Ridgley, 366
Prof. T. H. Robinson, D.D., 316
Oliver P. Scaife, 336
Charles Hodge Scott, 185
James B. Scott, 257
K. Solomon, 286
Miss Amelia H. Steevenson, 334
Clarence H. Swearengen, 175
Prof. Benjamin B. Warfield, D.D., 287
Harrison M. and Mrs. Caroline L. Williamson, 164
Rev. Robert Dick Wilson, 314
Mrs. E. M. Winans, 132
Richard G. Wood, 243